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MARCH 2009

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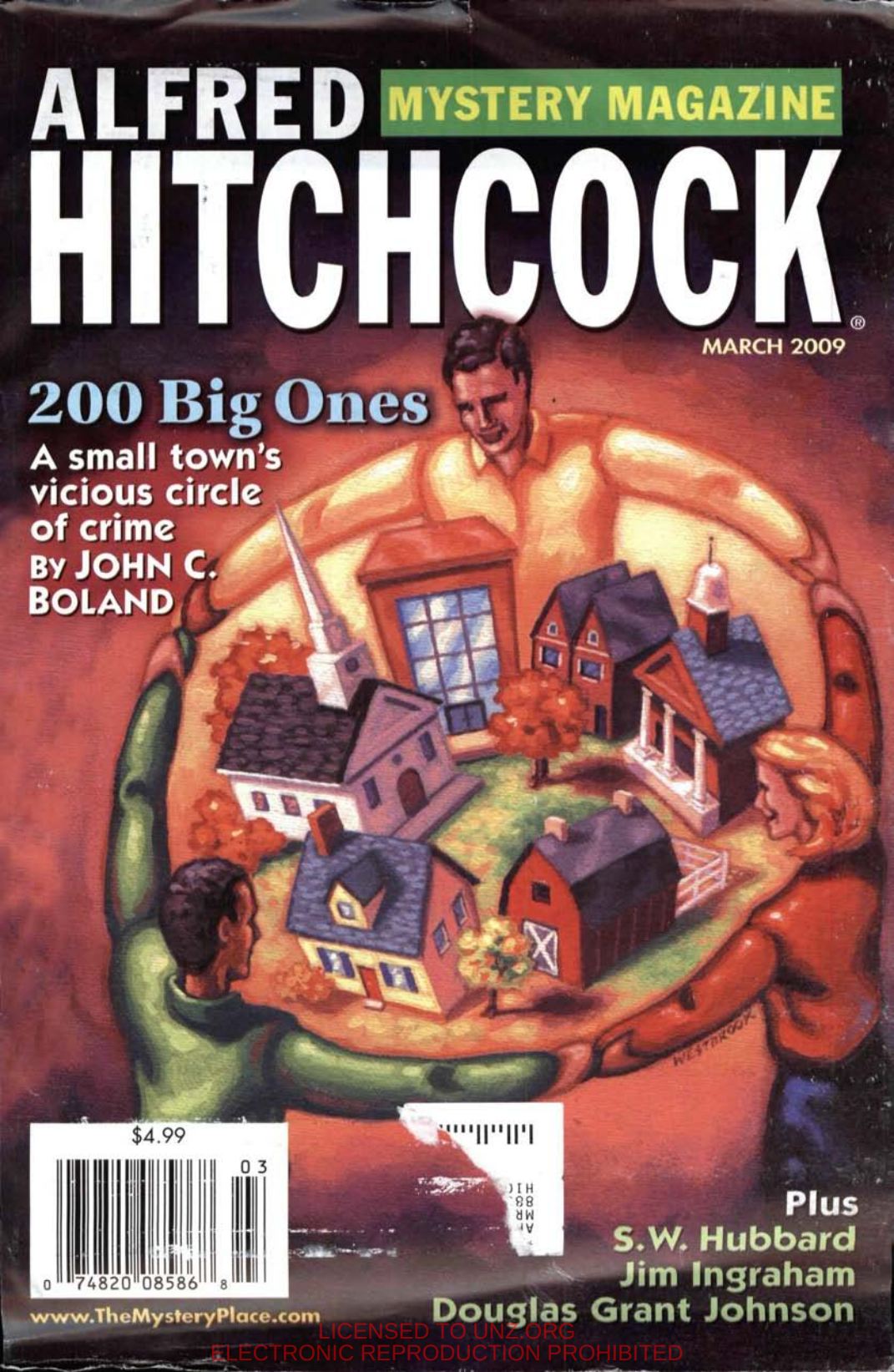
By JOHN C. BOLAND



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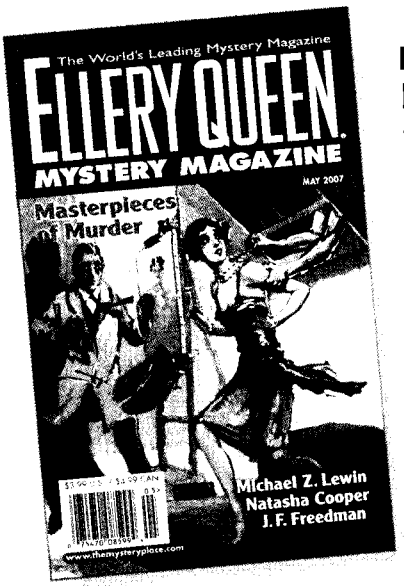

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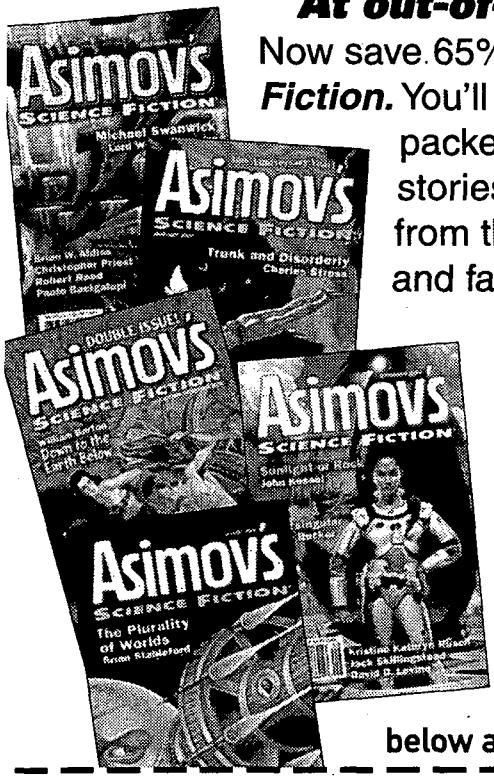

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK MYSTERY MAGAZINE

March 2009

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What comes around

As we go to press with the March issue, we have just returned from Bouchercon, which was held this year in Baltimore—the burial place of Edgar Allan Poe and the setting for the popular crime show *The Wire*. The Bouchercon convention (named in honor of the writer, editor, and critic Anthony Boucher) is the largest gathering of mystery readers and writers in America. Held each year in a different city, it is an opportunity to connect with old friends, put names to faces, and have books signed by favorite authors. It's also the occasion for the bestowal of various awards, and we were delighted to be represented by finalists for three different prizes: Neil A. Schofield's July-August 2007 story "Murder: A User's Guibe" was a finalist for a Barry award; Beverle Graves Myers's story "Brimstone P.I." (May 2007) was a finalist for a Macavity award; and Loren D. Estleman's story "Trust Me" was a finalist for a Shamus award for Best Private Eye story.

I'd like to congratulate all our finalists, and indeed all of our writers who enthrall us month after month with stories of malice, murder, and greed. This issue is no different, with six great crime stories.

Next year's Bouchercon will take place in Indianapolis, October 15–18. You can find more information at it www.bouchercon2009.com.

LINDA LANDRIGAN, EDITOR

The Lineup

JOHN C. BOLAND is a financial journalist. His last story for AHMM, "Sargasso Sea," appeared in September 2008.

JAY BROOKS is a psychologist in New Mexico. "Oil Slick" is his first published short story.

Booked & Printed columnist ROBERT C. HAHN reviews mysteries for *Publishers Weekly* and *New York Post*, among other places, and is the former mystery columnist for the *Cincinnati Post*.

S. W. HUBBARD is the author of a book series set in the Adirondack mountains. Her third novel, *Blood Knot*, was released by Pocket Books in 2005.

JIM INGRAHAM's first novel, *Remains to be Seen*, a police procedural set in Maine, was published by Five Star Mysteries this summer.

DOUGLAS GRANT JOHNSON's story, "Cliff's Folly," appeared in the November 2007 issue of AHMM. He is at work on a novel.

GILBERT M. STACK holds a PhD in history. His last story, "Guilt," appeared in the December 2008 issue of AHMM.

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THE GRAYCATS

DOUGLAS GRANT JOHNSON

"Best not to think about home too much, Arthur," Orvil said.

Orvil was trying, like I was, to act little older than we were. But I thought he missed his home more than he'd admit. I turned to Arthur. He claimed to be sixteen, like me and Orvil, but I wasn't so sure about that. He was a little young to be out on the road, but so were me and Orvil, when you come down to it. Still, there we were, all three of us, in the middle of the night, clinging to the top of a boxcar on a fast-moving freight train.

"Nah . . . it's okay to think about home," I said, loud enough to be heard over the noise of the cars. "I think about it all the time."

"You miss your mom?" Arthur said.

"Sure do. Books too. Back when my pa had a job and we had money, he'd buy books for me and my sister. I wanted to bring one of them . . . one by Kipling, but my pa said it was best to travel light."

The train swung away from the flat farmlands we had been passing through and headed into some rougher hill country.

"Think we'll ever get there?" Arthur said after a moment.

"Sure," I said.

"California seems like such a long ways."

"Guess it is," Orvil said, "but see . . . we just gotta keep our minds set on gettin' there."

"An' keep puttin' a few miles behind us ever' day."

"How many days, you think it'll take, Orv—"

The boxcar hit a bad soft spot on the roadbed and bucked so hard it almost threw us off. We grabbed the timbers of the roof walk and held on as tight as we could.

"Ridin' up here on the roof wasn't the best idea you ever had, Stanley," Orvil said to me over the extra clanking of wheels and couplers.

"We're still here, aren't we? That railroad bull didn't see us up here when he kicked everyone else off."

"Shucks . . . you'd think the railroad'd keep their tracks in better shape," Orvil said.

The boxcar settled down to its regular swaying and bumping. About the same time, we heard voices from the platform of the caboose, the next car behind us.

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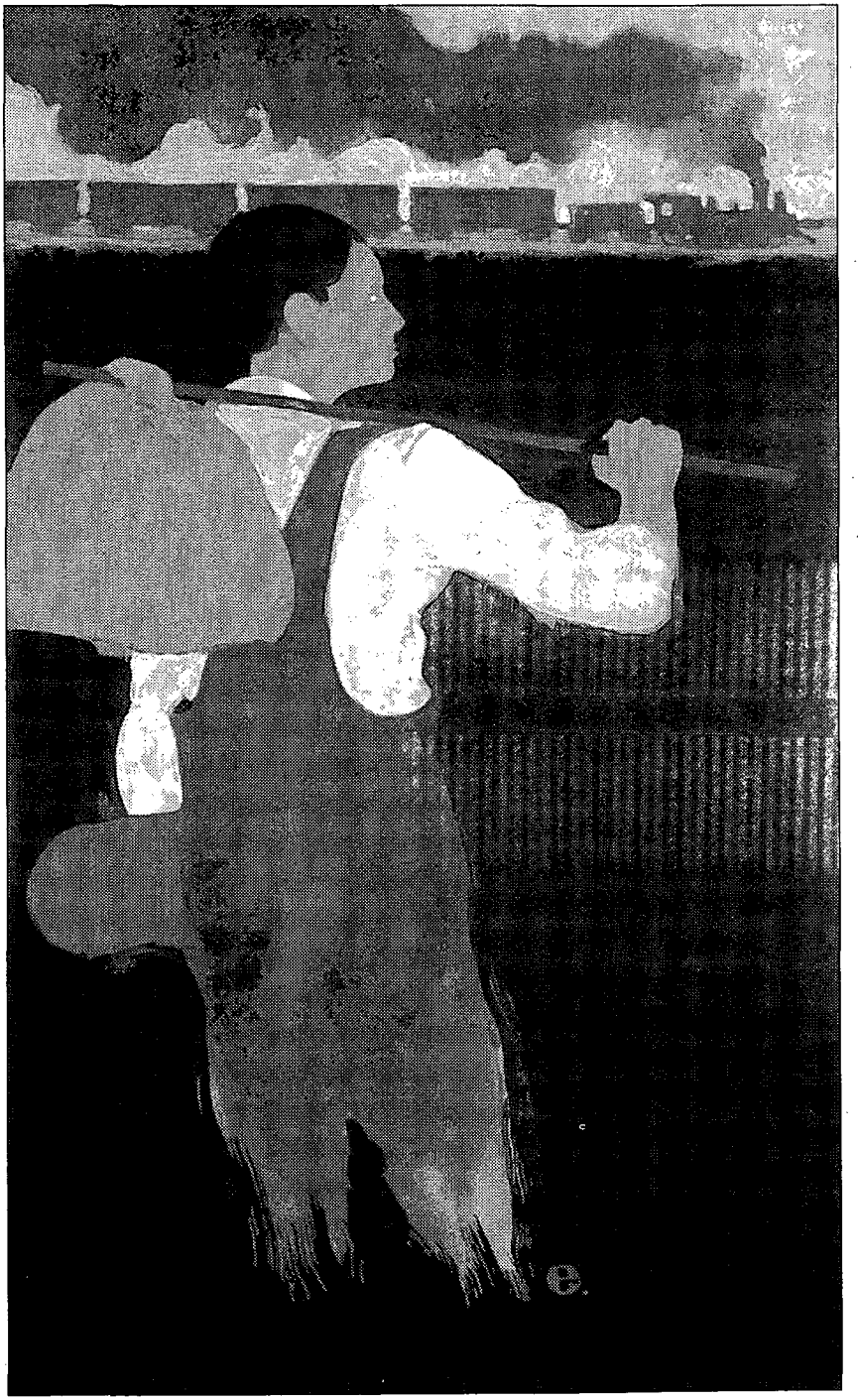

Edward Kinsella III

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"Thought I heard somethin.'"

"Let it go, Stark. Catch 'em in the yard in the morning."

"I'll be havin' a look."

A few seconds later a shape appeared above the ladder at the tail end of the car.

"Well . . . we got a whole passel of graycats up here," the shape called over his shoulder.

In no time at all, the fellow was on top of the car with us and he was carrying a big club. Right away, we began to retreat, but Arthur wasn't as fast. He grabbed Arthur by the collar and sent him stumbling backward, toward the rear of the car.

"Get off!" he said before turning to me and Orvil.

But we weren't waiting to be invited off. We were already scrambling for the front of the car.

Climbing up or down a boxcar's ladder while a train is moving is scary enough, but when the bull started for us, even trying it in the dark didn't seem such a bad idea. We were just reaching for the ladder when we heard Arthur's interrupted scream, and then nothing but the sound of wheels on the joints of the track.

The last glimpse I'd had of Arthur, he was stumbling backward, trying to regain his balance. Maybe he would have, I don't know, but what I think must have happened is, he ran out of roof and backed up into thin air between the cars.

We stopped with our feet on the bottom rungs of the ladder and considered our choices. One was to hang on like we were until the next station. But the train was moving at a pretty good clip, and as Orvil said, the track wasn't in top condition. Every time the wheels hit a few weak ties or a bad track joint, the car would lurch again, threatening to pitch us off.

But the bull was not waiting for that. In no time at all, he was leaning over the top and swinging his big club at our knuckles on the rungs.

"That feller's pure crazy!" Orvil said above the roar of the wheels.

I felt the stir of air on my fingers as his club barely missed. We both grabbed a lower rung, but this made us slouch down and hang out farther from the car. It was awkward, and I didn't think I could hold on for long. I glanced at Orvil and I could see he was thinking the same thing. Jumping off seemed like a wise choice. Especially when it looked like that crazy bull was getting ready to climb down after us.

Orvil nodded and we made ready to go.

I was lucky, landing in a spot covered with grass and a lot of small weeds. Orvil, jumping a second later than I did, wasn't so lucky. He landed in a bramble of small bushes, and it took a while before I found him and got him untangled. It was another while before he found he had suffered no broken bones. But he was in a lot of pain just about everywhere, and for a long time he lay on the ground trying not to move. I sat with him for a

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while, nursing my own bruises and listening to his moans. And feeling bad that there was nothing that I could possibly do to help him.

Graycats, the bull called us. Well, that's what the other hobos called us, too, although not with anything like the pure malice we'd heard on top of that boxcar. It was what they called anyone as green as we were about the ways of the road, and right then I couldn't say they were wrong.

We'd sort of looked after Arthur because he seemed kind of innocent, and we figured if we didn't, he wouldn't last long on his own. Orvil and I, we left home because there was no place anymore where we could earn money our folks needed, and we each had decided our folks couldn't afford to keep feeding and clothing us. There had been a few tears, but no argument. Arthur figured about the same thing one day, and he told us he'd just packed up a few things, left his folks a note, and took off.

We didn't spend all our time traveling. Most of the time we were just looking for any kind of work and scrounging for something to eat and in general trying to learn from the other hobos about surviving on the bum. Fortunately, there seemed to be no end to the number of likely fellows to learn from after what happened one lousy day in the fall of twenty-nine, and the country went from there straight to the dogs.

So far, I had never felt in any danger among my fellow travelers. They were good people, I thought, and a good number of them weren't a lot older than Orvil and I. Most were just folk who'd had bad things happen to them. What us three graycats were looking for was what everyone was looking for, a better chance in another place. And if we could find work, maybe we could send something back home.

I'd heard there was work on the farms out in California, and we figured we'd head out there together. But California was two thousand miles away, and one fellow told us early on that the railroads were the fastest way to get there. The most luxurious, too, another promptly said. This was met by a lot of loud laughter from anybody close enough to hear it. What we found out was that a hard floor in the corner of an empty boxcar was a lot more plush than walking, and so we spent our days scouting for a handout and any train that looked to be heading west.

"It wasn't fair," Orvil said between deep breaths. He kept saying it over and over.

"You sure you don't have any broken ribs?"

"Don't think so," he said while exploring a pain in his side. "You?"

"No."

Neither of us spoke for a long time. In the far distance a train whistle sounded. It could have been the same train we'd just been evicted from. To me it sounded like it was crowing about its victory over us.

I was hurting, but I wasn't as banged up as Orvil. We could hear the sound of a stream close by, but I couldn't even fetch him a cup of water.

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I'd had a blanket rolled up around a tin cup and plate and some other small things, but I'd quickly lost interest in them when we scrambled for the ladders. Orvil had a small sack of things he'd left up there too. We both figured we'd never see any of our stuff again. For the moment, we just lay there and tried to get whatever rest our aches and pains would permit. But even with all that, Arthur's tumble off that car was pretty much what was on our minds.

"You hear what I heard . . . back there?" I said.

"Sure did."

"I guess he's dead."

"Must be."

I lay a long time looking up at the stars before I could say it.

"It was my fault."

"You wasn't the one, pushed him off the car."

"Being up there wasn't the best idea I ever had. You said it . . . you were right."

"Fiddlesticks! That bull's the one pushed Arthur off."

He was, but there was no getting around it, it was my idea to start with.

"You hear me, Stanley?" Orvil said. "Ain't your fault."

I didn't answer. I was thinking, what a fine bunch of help we'd been to Arthur. I didn't know who to be more angry at—me or that crazy bull.

When it got to be light enough to see, I got up and started to walk back along the tracks. Orvil raised up on one elbow. I could see he was still hurting.

"Stay there," I said. "I'll be back in a bit."

"Where you goin'?"

"I'll see if I can find Arthur."

"We figured he'd be dead."

"I expect so."

"Likely ain't going to be pretty."

I didn't answer, just kept walking.

"I'm goin' t' kill that bugger!" Orvil called after me.

"Yeah," I said, but probably not loud enough for him to hear. My mind was busy thinking about what I expected to find.

I found him, must have been at least a mile back along the line. He'd landed with his legs across one of the tracks and that had done the kind of damage a person would expect. The rest of him was banged up some, but his face, except for an ugly gash above one ear, looked as peaceful as if he were sleeping. I tried to convince myself he'd gone before the wheels got to him. A minute later, I felt so sick I wanted to run out of there as fast as I could.

In the end, I stayed and moved him—all of him—a few feet away from the tracks and considered what I should do. It didn't seem proper to me that Arthur should simply be left out there. Burying him was out of the

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question. I had no digging tools and the ground was too hard to dig in it by hand. It would be better, anyway, if someone came out from some town and collected him and made a proper burial. Maybe they could find out where he was from and notify his folks. But then I thought that was probably not going to happen. Arthur never told us his last name, or where he was from, so how could total strangers do it? I hated it, that he had died out here alone.

I went through his pockets to see if there were any letters or anything that would help. There wasn't, and there was nothing in a small bag of things he had tied to the belt of his coat.

My eyes held on his coat. It was a green plaid thing, several sizes too big for him, but it was of heavy material. The coat was a little tattered to begin with but it hadn't suffered much in the fall. I thought of Orvil, who didn't have a coat, and who was getting along as best he could by always wearing two shirts.

I almost made apologies out loud as I took Arthur's coat off. He had a blanket, and he usually carried it rolled up and roped across his shoulders. It was still nearby and I gathered it up. I pulled a piece of bark off a dead tree a few feet away and found a rock with a sharp edge and used it to scratch a message on the back side of it. What I wrote was, "His name was Arthur," and when I finished I put the piece of bark in his shirt pocket, covered him with his blanket, and weighted the edges with rocks. Maybe it wouldn't keep the animals off him, but I hoped it would at least keep the birds away until the proper people could come for him.

I picked up his coat and his little bag and paused a few steps away.

"I'm sorry, Arthur," I said, even though I was sure he wasn't going to hear me. A moment later, I started walking back to where I'd left Orvil. I was beginning to think that even if being up on that roof was my fault, that railroad bull had no call to throw Arthur off a moving train.

There wasn't a step I made I didn't mutter, "That crazy bugger shouldn't have done that!"

I don't remember exactly when it was that we decided we were going to kill that railroad bull. But it was at least a couple of hours after we started walking along the tracks. It wasn't any kind of blood oath we made. We simply stopped walking, turned and shook hands, and started off again. It had started out as Orvil's idea, but after seeing what condition Arthur had been left in, I hadn't been hard to convince. It didn't matter that neither of us had any idea how we were going to do it. What we lacked in ideas we surely made up for by our enthusiasm for the prospect.

We hadn't passed through any towns after climbing aboard the train, so we took our chances by following the direction the train had been going. Fortunately, the next town wasn't that far, but it took us most of the day, moving at Orvil's hobbling speed, to get there. We found the local marshal's

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office and went in to report a body alongside the tracks about six miles back. The marshal wanted to know what I knew about its being there. I told him how a big railroad bull had simply picked our friend up and practically thrown him off the top of the car.

"Arthur was his name. All I knew him by," I concluded.

He looked at me for a few seconds and broke out in a chuckle.

"Appears you boys has been introduced to Beater Stark." He let out a string of laughter. "Pretty famous along this part a' the line for keepin' the riffraff off the cars."

"Well . . . he killed Arthur," Orvil said, "an' he didn't need to."

"Or maybe he did," the marshal said. "Anyway, I'd say another trespassin' tramp has learnt his lesson good!" He must have thought it was a pretty good joke because he was chuckling a good long time before he pulled a big revolver out from one of his desk drawers. "Back there boys," he said as he gestured with the muzzle of the revolver toward a doorway at the rear of the room.

"You arrestin' us? What for?" Orvil said as we backed away. I'd never had a gun barrel pointed at me before, but I'd always been taught to respect what could come out of the end of it.

"Aroun' here, trespassin' on railroad property's an automatic ten days," he said as he led us to a cell in the back room, "an' Judge Pringle, he don't like to waste the court's time with cases of confession, an' you boys just confessed. Consider yourselves sentenced. Automatic, ten days hard labor."

"Don't we get some kinda' trial?" Orvil said.

"Cases of confession . . . Judge Pringle, he'll stop by and sign the papers sometime in the next few days. Be the same thing."

"What about Arthur?" I said as the cell door closed in front of us.

"From what you said, I guess he won't be charged with trespassin,'" the marshal said as he turned the key and left. He thought that was funny, too, and we could hear him chuckling all the way back into the front office.

We were a long time getting to sleep that night, and the last thing I remember was Orvil muttering, "I'm goin' to kill that bugger," for about the fortieth time. I knew he wasn't talking about the marshal, although I was ready to feel unkindly toward anyone who could laugh about what had happened to Arthur.

About six the next morning we were awakened by the marshal and another man who pointed a shotgun at us while the marshal outfitted us with leg irons. When he was finished, we were prodded toward the front.

"Where we going?" I asked as we left the cell.

"You'll be hayin' today, boys," was the only thing the marshal said as both men led us out to a Model T sedan sitting in the street.

"Don't we get something to eat in your jail?" I asked.

"Give him a good day's work, he might give you a li'l somethin'," the marshal said, nodding toward the other man.

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"Shucks . . . we ain't had nothing to eat for two—" Orvil started to say to the marshal.

"Don't get too frisky now, boys," the marshal said as the man cranked the engine at the front of the car. "The key to those irons is back in the office there, and this gen'leman here is authorized to shoot if one a' y' should take it in his head to wander off." Then, he spoke to the man. "I'll 'spect you back here about sundown."

A nod and a wave was all the answer he got, but it seemed to be satisfactory. The man put his flivver in gear and we were off.

The man drove to a farm about a mile or so from the town. He turned off the road and drove past a house and barn directly to a large alfalfa field. The crop had been cut several days before, and it had dried enough it could be stacked on a wagon and hauled to his barn, which was what we were going to be doing. Orvil and I looked at each other as we both realized this was the "hard labor." It wasn't really hard compared to anything else a person had to do around a farm. I'd gladly done the same thing a year before for a couple of neighbors, and been paid for it with a silver dollar and a couple of sacks of flour. But this time we were doing it with a scatter gun pointed at us and neither of us was stupid enough to believe we were going to see any money come out of it.

In one corner of the field a hay wagon with an extra large flatbed was parked. A couple of horses harnessed to it stood there looking about as enthused about the day's work as Orvil and I. A couple of boys were already forking hay onto the bed and doing it with as much enthusiasm as the horses. The farmer's sons, I figured, and I was right.

As banged up as he was, Orvil wasn't much use, but neither the farmer nor his sons complained much. In the early afternoon the farmer's wife brought some dinner to the field and we stopped for a few minutes to eat it. His wife made sure we ate as well as the farmer's sons, and we thanked her for it.

We were finished at the end of the second day. When the last forkful was in the barn, we were loaded directly into the man's flivver. The first day, we'd been given supper before being taken back to jail. We hoped we were going to be invited a second time, but all that happened was the farmer stopped at the house and handed his scatter gun to his wife and told her to watch us for a minute. As soon as he was out of sight she lowered the muzzle and approached us. She looked over her shoulder and reached into the pocket of her apron. Out came a couple of apples and a big hunk of cheese.

"Better keep these out of sight on the way back to town," she said.

We had the food tucked away in our pockets just as her husband came out the door, stuffing something into his pockets. He cranked the engine to life and we were on our way back to another night in jail.

When our cell was securely closed, the marshal and the farmer walked back to the front. As they were going through the door, I noticed the

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farmer take something out of his pocket and put it in the hand of the marshal. From there it went into the marshal's pocket. It happened quickly, but I could see the glint of a few coins.

When they were gone, Orvil nudged me.

"You see that?"

"Yeah . . . bugger's been rentin' us out."

"Can he do that?"

"This part of the country, things must be different."

The farmer's wife might have had some idea the marshal wouldn't be providing us any supper because we never saw him again that evening. After we polished off the apples and cheese, we lay for a long time looking at the ceiling.

"This part o' the country," Orvil said, "even seems to be okay to kill people by throwin' 'em off boxcars. I'm goin' t' kill that railroad bull."

"I'll flip you, heads or tails, to see who does it."

"Ain't neither of us got anythin' to flip."

The other eight days went about the same, including a Sunday, and we did everything from painting a house to digging post holes and stringing fence wire. Both of us had some experience doing those kinds of things at home, the only difference being this time the marshal was getting our pay instead of us. But we usually had a couple of meals a day and the jail was some improvement over the hard ground in an alley somewhere. And Orvil's aches and pains slowly disappeared.

From time to time one or the other of us brought up the idea of escape, and there might have been a time or two we could have tried it. But we wouldn't have gotten far with those leg irons, and getting rid of them by ourselves would have been impossible without the tools we'd only find in a good blacksmith shop.

We thought some about California, too, but not as much as we used to. I guess our minds had become fixed on that railroad bull.

Listening to the idle talk between the marshal and others, we heard the name of the town Beater Stark lived and worked out of. He seemed to be well known in that section of the country as a vicious bugger for the way he liked to swing a club at the legs of retreating trespassers. We overheard a few tales of his club, which was actually an old baseball bat tipped with a small rusty spur gear fixed to the end with a big lag screw. The stories were told of the damage a couple of blows the end of that instrument could do, and the teller's point of view was always that the vagrants had it coming.

We never saw that judge the whole time we were there. Or the papers he was supposed to sign. For all I know, maybe there was no judge or no papers. Maybe that's why there was no ceremony at the end of the ten days. The marshal simply came in at six on the eleventh day, unlocked the cell door, and tossed in a paper sack with about half a loaf of bread. He left

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without saying a word. He also left the cell door open. We took that to mean we ought to be moving along, and we did. Neither of us said much in complaint about the experience as we walked away. I think pretty much all of Orvil's thinking apparatus was concentrating on how we were going to kill Beater Stark.

I guess mine was too.

Orvil wanted to head out and start looking for Stark right away, but I thought we ought to go back along the tracks to find the place where Arthur had gone off the train. The marshal had simply ignored us any time we asked about him, and I wanted to see for myself if he had just been left there.

Orvil was walking a lot better after his hard labor convalescence and this time it took only a few hours to find the spot where I'd pulled Arthur from the tracks. There were still a few dark brown streaks of dried blood running down the sides of the rail where it happened. But Arthur was not there, nor was the blanket I'd covered him with. We were left to speculate whether people had been sent to collect him, or whether scavengers from the nearby woods had performed the task. There was nothing I could see that told either way.

I glanced at Orvil. He was staring at the adjoining woods, too, and was probably having the same thoughts I was. We walked around some in the woods but found nothing there either.

"I'm goin' to kill that crazy bugger," he said. It was the first he'd opened his mouth since we'd arrived, and he said it hardly above a whisper.

The town where Beater Stark lived and worked out of was about forty miles away and we got there mostly by hitching rides along the highway. For the last dozen miles we hopped a freight and made an uneventful trip along with a half dozen other fellow travelers. We left the train as it was slowing into the yard and followed a couple of more experienced fellows into a hobo camp near the yard. No one took special notice of us because of our ages. There must have been at least seventy or eighty hobos scattered around a fairly large grove of trees and bushes, and more than a dozen of them were about as young as we were. The place looked like it had been used as a gathering place for some time.

Now that we were in the same town where they said Beater Stark lived, our next problem was finding out how our paths might cross. And how we were going to do it. What were we going to do, a couple of kids like us? Break down his door and club him to death with his own baseball bat with the gear on the end? Not likely. Nevertheless, we never thought of giving up.

If we could find some kind of work, we thought we could buy a gun. You could buy a pistol for only a few dollars most everywhere. Back home, a grocery store had a couple of old rifles and revolvers they'd taken in in

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exchange for food. You could have bought any one for three or four dollars. But it took only a little asking around to conclude that finding any kind of work was nothing more than a pipe dream, at least in this town. We hung around the camp for a couple of days, sharing somebody's largesse or cadging a handout around town where we could. One lady gave us a good meal in exchange for a couple of hours weeding her small vegetable garden.

We thought it was a good idea not to call attention to ourselves by asking around for his address. We listened a lot but heard nothing that would help us find him.

But right away, our luck changed. We ran into an older fellow who had shared his meal with us in another city. I remembered he called himself Charlie.

"Didn't I see you fellas a couple a' weeks ago? Back in Canfield?" Charlie asked.

"Yeah," I said.

"Don't have no more food this time."

"We're all right."

"Seems there was three a' y' then."

"There were," I said.

Charlie waited as if for an explanation. I gave it to him along with a pretty detailed explanation of how Arthur came to fall under a train.

"Beater Stark," he said right away.

"You know who he is?"

"Most everybody ridin' th' rails—this part a' th' country, anyway—they've either heard a' him or met him. Those as has, don't figure on meetin' him twice."

"I do," Orvil said. "I'm goin' t' kill the bugger."

Charlie laughed, "It's been thought about b'fore. Ain't been done yet."

"Will be. We're going t' kill the bugger."

"You? Coupla' kids . . . you think you're gonna . . ." His smile faded away as he looked at Orvil. There was something in Orvil's eye that let you know this wasn't idle chatter. It was a look I hadn't seen before, either.

"How y' plan to take care a' that little chore?"

"First couple dollars I get ahead, I'm goin' t' buy me a pistol an' some shells. Shucks, th' rest'll be easy."

Charlie turned to me.

"You know where to find this bull?"

"Can't be that hard to find," I said with a little more confidence than I felt.

"You don't know?"

"We'll find him."

"You think your friend here is serious?" he said to me.

"Always seemed so to me."

"You know how to use a pistol?" He directed this question at Orvil.

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"Sure."

Charlie looked first at me, than at Orvil, then back at me.

"Huh . . . well . . . might be he'd let a couple kids get close t' him." This he said almost to himself.

He sat, staring into his fire for a few moments, then rose to his feet.

"I think I know a feller, might be able to help with just what y' need. Sit here a minute or two, boys. I got to go have a word with him."

He was gone for a lot more than a minute or two, but when he came back, he had a smile on his face. When he was seated, he pulled a little cloth-wrapped bundle from his coat pocket and handed it to me. I pulled a corner of the cloth back. It was a small thing with a barrel about two inches long, and it looked old, really old. The cylinder was small, too, a five-shot, but it held only four bullets. They looked smaller than what would have come out of the end of that revolver the marshal pulled on us, but I didn't know enough about guns to say what caliber they were. There was a little spot of rust on the bottom of the grip, and the worn finish made me think it had been well used. I closed the cloth over it again.

"Fellow who owns this, he's sort o' laid up," Charlie said. "An' he owes Stark for a coupl'a' broken ribs."

Orvil reached for the bundle and I handed it to him. He pulled the cloth open just long enough to give the contents a quick once over, then stuffed the whole thing into one of the pockets of what used to be Arthur's coat.

"Only four bullets," Orvil said.

Charlie shrugged.

"One oughta' be enough, I guess," Orvil said, smiling. But it came out sort of grim.

Charlie noted it and leaned closer.

"The fellow who gave this t' me says Stark does mosta' his drinkin in a place called Pappy's Rest, right across from th' Railway Express office. Yesterday, I followed him back where he lives. It's nine blocks down th' same street . . . on the corner . . . little two-room clapboard house . . . never been painted. Only one like it . . . can't hardly miss it."

We both stared at Charlie for this sudden windfall of information.

"Word around th' yards is, he ain't workin' t'day," Charlie said.

"You know this for sure?" Orvil said.

"It's for sure."

"You and your friend know a lot about this fellow," I said.

"There's a few . . . brakemen . . . firemen . . . they're not unfriendly. Don't like what they seen him do . . . they mention him in the saloons now and again."

"Okay." I said.

"Remember, boys, tonight'd be the best time."

"Tell your friend we'll use this, all right." Orvil said, patting his pocket.

"Luck, boys," Charlie said, smiling.

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For a few moments I thought about our incredible stroke of good luck in being given all that information about Stark, and with a pistol to boot. It was almost too good to be true. But who was I to question the opportunity? I stopped thinking about it and tucked it away in the back of my mind. We had a task that needed doing, and all at once we were in good shape to do it.

From what Charlie said, we'd have to move fast. It didn't take much thinking to decide Stark's favorite saloon would not be the best place for a couple of fellows like us to try to run into him. That left the streets or his house. Orvil thought about waiting for him at his house after dark, catching him when he came home from the saloon. It wasn't much of a plan, but it was the best we could think of.

What we needed most was to know the lay of the land, and I volunteered to have a look around. I went alone so as not to attract a lot of attention, and walked through Stark's part of town right before dark. As Charlie said, it was easy to find. Houses in his neighborhood were not really close to each other, and it looked easy. It was a two-room house, all right, and it had one door that fronted on the street. When I turned the corner I could see there was a back door and a path that led to a privy and a shed of some sort.

It still looked easy when we came back after full dark. The nearest streetlight was a bare bulb high on a light pole and it was a block away, but the moon was pretty full so we had enough light to know where to put our feet. We didn't come across another soul as we approached the house.

There were lights on in both rooms, and we walked around to the back of the house and came up to a window. What was inside looked like the kitchen, and it seemed to be empty. Next to that window was a back door and then another window. We moved to the other window. Through it, we could see it was a bedroom, and it was lit by a floor lamp with a shade that barely cast enough light to see. But we could make out a bed and a figure lying fully clothed on top of the covers.

"Him, you think?" I whispered.

"Seems likely," Orvil said.

It was too early in the evening to be bedtime for someone like Stark, but I noticed an empty whiskey bottle sitting on a chair near the bed. I figured we were looking at the same thing that would put an uncle of mine into a sleep so deep you couldn't wake him by driving a herd of cows past his bed.

"Pretty lucky, findin' him alone, first rattle outta' th' box," Orvil said. With a nod of his head, he motioned back to the kitchen end of the house where the back door was. Orvil tried the knob. It turned easily and quietly.

The moment we were inside, I felt a stuffy black chill settle in, along with a brief urge to turn and run. But I stayed, and as I glanced around I

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was sure we had found the right house. The baseball bat we had heard so much about was resting across the arms of a chair next to the door. I ran my fingers over the teeth of the gear that was fixed to the end. It was old and brown with rust, and only a little larger in diameter than the end of the bat, but the edges of the teeth were still quite sharp. A leather loop was secured through a hole in the small end of the bat. I quickly withdrew my hand, imagining the damage a heavy blow with this thing would do even if a fellow were only hit with the shank.

The room was dimly lit by a small bulb in a plain socket hanging from the ceiling by a twisted green cord. Nothing fancy, but it gave enough light.

To our left we could see the door to the other room of the house. It was wide open. We stood for a moment, both of us expecting Stark to leap from the doorway or spring from some other dark corner. Orvil had been holding the pistol in his hand and he raised it and pulled the hammer back to cock it. The click seemed as loud as a cannon to my ears.

We began to be aware of a low rasping sound coming from the other room. Orvil gave me a nudge and I cautiously advanced to the doorway and used one eye to peer around the jamb. The light came from an old floor lamp whose faded shade contained pictures of gondolas floating in the drowned streets of a city. The bulb was a small one to start with, and the shade cut down the light even more. But it cast a warm glow over the room and I could see the figure still lying on the bed.

Orvil gave me another little nudge as he moved up beside me. We could hear the rasping sound more clearly. It was snoring.

"It's him," Orvil said in a whisper.

I nodded my agreement. I'd had only a quick look at him on top of that boxcar, but the memory was as clear as if I'd been carrying a photograph. I'd be seeing it in my mind for a long time in the future.

"Drunk as a jangled skunk," Orvil whispered in my ear again. He went around me and tiptoed closer to the figure. A loud creak in the floor didn't break the rhythm of the snoring but it sure set my nerves on edge a bit. Orvil motioned me to join him.

"It's him, for sure."

I nodded again.

Orvil moved closer and when we were standing next to the bed, he raised the pistol and aimed the barrel at Stark's chest. His hand held steady at first, but right away began to shake slightly. I wondered why Orvil didn't just go ahead and pull the trigger. I watched as the shaking grew worse and a few seconds later he lowered the pistol to his side. It was my turn to give him a nudge and he raised his hand again and placed his finger on the trigger. He was more steady this time and I pulled in a deep breath and half closed my eyes, getting ready for the sound of the shot. But it didn't come, and I finally gave him another little nudge. His response was to hand it to me. He nodded that I was to

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take it. I did, and rather gingerly, too, because the thing was still cocked, ready to fire.

For a brief few seconds my mind was filled with the power this piece of iron gave me. I could indeed kill someone with it, and I was standing next to a man whose vicious deeds deserved it and would likely not be punished any other way.

I raised the pistol and leaned closer until I could level the muzzle about a foot from the side of his head. I couldn't miss at this distance, and I let my finger lightly touch the trigger. On the count of three, I silently told myself, and commenced counting.

Well, I got to three and I could have stood there all night counting up to a million, but the command to tighten my finger just wouldn't come.

I lowered my hand when I noticed how bad it was shaking and shoved the pistol at Orvil. He took it, mostly to keep it from falling on the floor, and aimed it at Stark again. I turned and walked back into the kitchen. As I crossed the threshold the rasping snore continued undisturbed. Another creaky floorboard told me Orvil was following me. I could hear the click as he carefully lowered the hammer.

By the time I was through the outside door, he caught up to me and jammed the pistol into his pocket. We walked away in silence, not even glancing at each other.

Back in the camp, we found an isolated spot and sat on the ground. Neither of us said much for a long time. I was still shaking and I thought Orvil was too.

"Whyn't you shoot him?" Orvil said. "You was close enough, you couldn'ta' missed."

I glanced at him, but soon looked away.

"Came down to it, I couldn't." I said. "I guess I ain't made like him."

Orvil sucked in a big breath and let it out all at once.

"Why didn't you?" I said. "You were there. You had your hands on the pistol . . . longer than I did."

He looked at me and held the gaze and seemed about to say something. He took the pistol out of his pocket and looked at it for a long moment before he put it back.

"Guess I'll go look for Charlie. He can give it back to his friend."

"I suppose he'll be disappointed."

"Prob'ly will."

He walked slowly away, leaving me with my own thoughts about why I hadn't pulled the trigger. One moment I wished I had, the next, I was glad I hadn't.

I felt more tired than I had been a long time and I leaned back against a tree. In no time at all I was asleep. There's no telling how much time passed, but when I awoke the aspect of the camp had changed. It was

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quiet. No murmurs of conversation or laughter at someone's joke. Orvil was nowhere to be seen, and I wondered where he was. His errand should have taken him no longer than a couple of minutes, but he wasn't there.

I wasn't worried, though. At least, at first. I kept telling myself, maybe he was just circulating around, seeing if anyone had any food they wanted to share. But it didn't work. I began to kick myself for letting him go off by himself to return the gun. It didn't take much effort to figure he might have gone off to have another try at killing that railroad bull.

At the same time, I was thinking a little more about being handed the means to deal with Stark. There was simply a lot of things I didn't know, and I began to be worried about Orville and whether he'd stopped to think about them as I was.

I took another quick turn around the hobo camp, just to make sure, walking a little faster this time, but not finding him anywhere. That's when I had to face up to it. I knew where I'd find him. And if I could, I had to find him before he went through with it.

I slipped out of the grove and went into the streets of the town. Trying to move slowly so as not to attract attention, I walked in the direction of Stark's house. What I felt like doing was to run and shout Orvil's name into every dark corner and shadow. But I held it in and tried to appear as if I was just some kid on my way home.

About a block from Stark's house I could see a dozen or so men crowded around his front door. I paused as several turned away and ran for a car that was parked in the street. I knew in an instant that what I'd come to prevent had already happened.

Without thinking, I turned and ran between a couple of houses. Doing that while a couple of men in the crowd happened to be looking in my direction wasn't the smartest thing I ever did. They saw the movement and with a shout two of them started off in my direction like a cat would go after a mouse.

I had a head start of at least a block, but I was running blind with no clear idea where I was running to. In one backyard I made a big racket when I tripped over a bucket, and in another I rattled a rickety fence when I climbed over it. If they couldn't see me, they could at least follow the noises I made.

They probably were because they were getting closer, and they had picked up a couple more men. If I were in the clear, I thought I might have outrun them, but there I was, blundering around in backyards where I could trip over something I couldn't see. Crossing another yard, I swerved just in time to avoid going flying over the tongue of a big farm wagon parked there. I paused to plan a quiet route out of the yard. I could hear two of my pursuers on the opposite side of the house, and I could hear shouts from the next house, wondering what was going on. It was getting to the point where I was sure they were going to catch up, and soon. And

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on top of everything else, I was getting winded. Hiding seemed like a good idea, but there wasn't time to look for a place.

In desperation, I heaved myself up over the side of the wagon box and landed next to a pile of cultivator parts and other barnyard paraphernalia. Fortunately, getting into it didn't make any noise.

As one of them came running down the side of the house, I grabbed an iron bar—part of some kind of garden cultivator—and sent it sailing over some bushes into another yard. It dislodged something with a loud crash. My closest pursuers trotted by within a few feet of me before they scurried over a fence in pursuit of the noise. There were shouts from somewhere a few houses away.

"Over here! I saw him in back of . . ."

I couldn't make out any more because there was more shouting. The other men who were after me ran back to the street. Maybe it was Orvil someone had seen, or maybe those men out there were just chasing shadows. I shuddered and I lay still in that wagon box for a long time, holding my breath until the stars overhead began to swim. But no one backtracked.

About the time I decided I had to try breathing again, a woman came to the back door of the house and spoke to someone inside. I took a quick breath and held it again.

"Whoever it was makin' all that racket, looks like they've gone."

She went back inside and closed the door. I lay there for another moment taking great gulps of air. When I was ready to move again, I moved very slowly and didn't make a move that could possibly make a noise or attract attention.

After that, I gave up on the idea of crossing backyards and took to the streets and once more tried to pretend I was just another kid walking home. A little later, a couple of men on a corner a block away turned and glanced in my direction. I saw them only out of the corner of my eye and didn't look at them directly. I used all the self-control I could muster and walked slowly and quietly along. They turned away and went off in another direction.

I hadn't had a lot of experience being on the run, but I was sure learning fast.

I avoided the railroad yard completely and carefully circled around to approach the grove from the side opposite the town. It wasn't much trouble to slip into the camp without attracting anyone's attention and find the spot where I'd last seen Orvil. He wasn't there, and I just slumped down and tried to get my breathing and nerves back to normal.

My heart was still going pretty fast when the deputies came.

"Awright, which one a' y' shot Tom Stark?" the first one called loud enough to be heard across most of the grove.

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There were five of them, and they were carrying lanterns and flashlights. And clubs that looked as big as fenceposts. Two of them had something shiny on their shirts and they may have been deputies all right, but none were in uniform. Somebody said later they had most likely been recruited moments before from the local saloons and sworn in, no matter how tanked they were. Shouting and swinging clubs, they began to move through the camp, poking their lights into the shadows and scattering men and their belongings with their clubs.

I tried to burrow back into a stand of bushes nearby but didn't make it. One of the men stomped up in front of me and jabbed me in the chest with the end of his club.

"You seen a kid, wears a green plaid coat?" he said, poking me again.

"Haven't seen him," I said. A second later, I added, "Not lately, anyway," but I said that to myself. By then, the fellow had gone to wave his club at someone else. I rubbed the sore spot on my ribs and watched the deputies going about their amusement, shaking out blankets and poking around in the underbrush. They would have been happy to run across the coat, but I was sure they would have preferred to find the fellow who was wearing it. I was glad no one came back to ask me the question again.

Once in a while one of them would shout at some unfortunate who couldn't get out of the way fast enough. It didn't take much close watching to notice that it was the fellows my age or a little older they paid particular attention to. The question they flung around most often was "Where is the kid with the green plaid coat?" It seemed a little strange they were looking for a particular type of person, or a particular coat, so soon. Unless Orvil had made a bigger mistake than I had.

But the searchers didn't find him, and finally they had their fill of breaking up the camp. As they left, they were laughing about their accomplishments. When they were gone, I moved around and pretty much looked in all corners of the grove. I didn't expect to find Orvil, and I didn't, but I went anyway. The camp was pretty much destroyed. Not that there was much they could destroy to begin with. They kicked over a few stewpots and put out the fires with the contents, scattered men and what few of the their belongings they could lay their hands on, and tore down a couple of shelters made with old blankets stretched across ropes. One poor fellow was nursing what looked like a broken arm, and a couple of others were trying to make some sort of sling for him out of his shirt.

I had plenty of time to think some more about how convenient it was that the fellow who gave us the gun already seemed to have so much information about Stark, including his address. I hadn't considered it fully at the time, but now I thought about how and why he was willing to be so helpful.

I also thought about how quickly that mob had shown up at the hobo camp looking for a kid with a coat like Orvil's.

It all gave me a bad feeling and I wondered exactly what had happened

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to him. Judging from the mood of the deputies who had just left, they might have strung him up to the nearest tree if they'd found him. I had no trouble imagining the same fate for me if they'd caught me as I fled through those backyards. We'd really been stupid, and well worthy of being called a couple of graycats.

There wasn't a lot of jubilation over the news about Beater Stark, although there were probably more than a few who were glad they wouldn't be running into him in the future. In fact, the camp was pretty quiet. Most of the inhabitants of the grove still stood around, not knowing whether to put themselves back together and settle down for the night or expect another attack. Soon rumors began to float through the camp that we could expect another visit from a crew of rowdies someone said was getting themselves together in Pappy's Rest. Soon after that, another rumor spread that a train was expected to come through sometime about midnight and stop for water. That rumor was considered reliable. The minute I heard it I thought it would be a fine idea to try to get aboard. It would be a fine idea for Orvil, too, if I could find him. Even if he had gone back and shot Stark, I hated to see him hanging from a tree, and I thought that was likely to happen, and quickly, if he stuck around this town. I hated to run off without at least knowing what had happened to him.

After poking around the camp once more, I headed for the town. I don't know what I expected to see or find, but I thought I'd go just to see what I could see.

I didn't get far. As I was crossing the last pair of tracks at the edge of the yard, I ran into a young fellow hurrying toward the camp. Even in the darkness, I could see he wasn't much older than me, certainly not old enough to vote. But it wasn't Orvil.

"I wouldn't be thinkin' about goin' over into town tonight, friend," he said to me as he passed.

"What's going on?"

"Where you been? Whole town's in an uproar over some railroad man gettin' shot right in his own house."

"They caught the one who did it?"

"Guess not. People're still out patrolling the streets. I just dodged a couple of 'em." He didn't wait for any more conversation and was gone into the shadows.

At least it wasn't likely they'd found Orvil yet. I paused for a moment to consider my chances of actually finding him if he was hidden somewhere in town. Possibly, he'd even managed to get out of town already. I slowly turned and followed.

About midnight the rumored freight train pulled through the station, its engine stopping at the water tank at the end of the yard. It wasn't a long train, perhaps a dozen and a half freight cars and a couple of flatcars with some big dump trucks on them. But it was a train, and it was going to be

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starting out again in only a few minutes. A number of the freight cars stood with their doors wide open, almost as an invitation, but the brakeman walked alongside the train to keep an eye out for anyone trying to get aboard. Along with several others, I watched from the trees as a couple of hobos on the opposite side of the train climbed into an open door of a boxcar as soon as the brakeman had gone past. By the time the brakeman walked forward to talk to the engineer, forty or so men and what was left of their baggage had sifted out of the shadows and climbed aboard. Some had hidden away in empty freight cars, some hung onto the ladders between the cars, others tried to hide in the big dump trucks, and a hardy few had climbed on top of some of the cars and laid down, hoping not to be noticed.

But the brakeman noticed, and he returned from his conversation with the engineer carrying a lantern and a long stick of wood he had obtained from somewhere. He began to inspect the cars and warn off the trespassers in a loud voice punctuated by a lot of noise he made by popping the stick on the sides of the cars. Most of the would-be riders dropped off and retreated into the darkness as he approached each car. His voice promised dire threats against anyone who dared set foot across the railroad property line again that night.

I don't know why, but perhaps his tone of voice wasn't as sincere as it should have been, or maybe it was something else. But once he had gone past a couple of cars, a few hardy souls sneaked out of the darkness again and quietly climbed back aboard. By the time he reached the caboose, evicting as he went, the train had begun to fill up again from the front. Kind of like when you're crossing a creek and the water fills in your footsteps as soon as you move your foot another step forward.

When he reached the caboose, he turned and looked over the train and slowly became aware of what had happened. Many of the hobos had not even tried to stay out of sight. As he stood and watched, a lone figure ran to the train. Hands immediately reached from the open door of a boxcar to pull him in. The brakeman stood for a moment contemplating what amounted to a mass exodus of the grove. And perhaps his chances of doing something about it.

"Aaaah—" he said with an exaggerated shrug of his shoulders. He uttered a string of disgusted sounds I couldn't hear clearly and slammed his stick onto the ground. He mounted the first step of the caboose and waved his lantern toward the engine. When he heard the answering whistle, he shrugged again, climbed to the platform, stepped inside the caboose, and closed the door.

Right away, the engine began to chuff and move backward, taking up the slack in the couplers. When the train started moving forward again, a fellow leaned out from the big open door of a boxcar in the middle of the train and waved a silent "Come on!" with his arm. Immediately, at least two dozen more hobos ran out of the trees and clambered aboard cars up and down the train.

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It was time for me to scram, too, but I hesitated, still thinking about Orvil and what I could do if I stuck around. I'd been watching the other hobos climbing aboard the train, keeping an eye out for the green plaid coat, but hadn't seen it. Still feeling like I was abandoning him, I finally ran toward the train. The last cars were just passing by. One of them was an empty boxcar and the doors were open. As I stood alongside, hands reached down and pulled me inside.

For a few seconds I hoped one of the hands might have been Orvil's. But none were his, and he wasn't in the car. I sat in the doorway looking back into the moonlight, hoping to see him hop aboard. I saw nothing but the edge of the grove as we slowly passed, and I figured I'd never see him again. My feelings about him were strange and unexpected. First off, I felt like I had just run out on a friend. I was also thinking I had made a big mistake by not talking Orvil out of the whole thing to start with.

Somehow, I was feeling a little better about our ten days at hard labor too. We had been eating better than we had the previous weeks, and we hadn't been working any harder than we would have at home, and nobody had been beating on us. The only really bad part of it was we hadn't been able to spend the time moving west. I was even prepared to believe someone had gone out there to find Arthur and say a few of the proper words over him. But I felt sad that there was someone back at Arthur's home who would wonder for a good long time where he was. That wasn't right, but nothing was going to change it. In the end, I figured the best use of all my energies was to think about tomorrow and the next train and . . .

I could hear someone running alongside the car we were riding. The train was just leaving the yard limits and was still moving slowly. But even at that speed it was dangerous to try to get aboard. Nevertheless, hands reached out, and the straggler was lifted up.

He wasn't wearing a coat of any kind. I watched him crawl away into the shadows, just another unfortunate tramp who'd decided things were going to be unhealthy in that town for a while.

There was an empty corner in the car and I moved into it and leaned against the wall. And considered myself lucky. And safe. That thought reminded me I was getting hungry again, and it wasn't long before I began to think more about finding a meal down the line than about where Orvil was. Whatever he had done, well, he'd made his own bed, and I guessed he'd have to lay in it.

The graycats were down to one, but in some ways I wasn't exactly feeling like one anymore and I didn't know how I felt about that, either.

Sometime later, about the time everyone in the car was settling down and trying to get comfortable enough to sleep, I was aware of someone moving to sit beside me.

"That you, Stanley?"

It was the fellow who had just been pulled aboard and it was Orvil's voice.

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"Shhh," he said, barely loud enough to hear. "Was lookin' for y'. . . thought it was you I saw gettin' on back there."

I just looked at him, hardly believing what I was seeing.

"What the Sam Hill have you been up to?" I said.

He looked away into the darkness for a long moment.

"We were supposed to be the goats!" he finally said.

"What?"

"Couldn't find Charlie, so I decided to have another try at Stark by myself. When I sneaked into his backyard, I could hear a big hullabaloo out in front. Then, when I heard one of 'em shout somethin' 'bout seein' a feller in a green plaid coat, that's when it came to me . . . how easy it all was. I took off a-flyin' through the backyards and ditched that coat down the hole of the first outhouse I came to."

I gave him a hard stare even though I wanted to believe him. He glanced around to see if anyone was paying attention and reached under his shirt. A second later he pulled out the pistol and swung out the cylinder as he handed it to me.

"Count 'em," he said, barely loud enough for me to hear.

It was too dark to really see, but I let my finger explore the front of the cylinder until I had counted the nose of four bullets.

"Charlie musta' seen us coming, all right!" I said.

"Buggers almost had me once. Then some feller shouts somethin' and they all ran off in another direction. I been hidin' out in the fields till just a little bit ago."

We were both silent for a few moments.

"I went looking for you," I said.

"You did? Why?"

"I figured what you were up to. I wanted to head you off, keep you out of trouble." I told him about my adventures running through the backyards.

"Geez, Stanley, I'm sorry."

Neither of us said more for at least a couple of miles while I contemplated the narrow escape of both of us. I looked at the pistol still in my hands and fumbled around until I had removed all four bullets. I glanced around to see if anyone was noticing me. They all seemed to be busy sleeping. I got up and moved carefully over to the big open door and tossed the bullets out into the trees that were whizzing by. A few seconds later the pistol followed. With any kind of luck, it would be caked with rust before anyone ran across it.

I came back and sat down. Orvil had been watching me.

"Whole thing was too easy," he whispered.

"We should've seen it."

Orvil nodded a "yes."

"Had to be Charlie who did it," I said.

"Had t' be," Orvil said.

"Who else?"

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"Fact is, sounded for all the world like Charlie's voice out front there, crowin' about seein' a feller in a green plaid coat."

I quickly glanced at Orvil. He gave me a nod that was a silent "You bet."

"It fits, all right." I said. "Whoever did the deed, he's there to make sure they're lookin' for a green plaid coat."

"That's the way I figured it." Orvil leaned back and tried to get comfortable.

"Going to miss Arthur," he said after a bit.

"I don't feel like they ought to be calling us graycats anymore."

Orvil gave me another of his "you bet" nods.

"You think we still have any business with that marshal?" I said.

"Nope."

"Didn't think so. Let's not get sidetracked again."

"Yeah, let's not."

The train clacked on for a while.

"Shucks . . . maybe Charlie'll run into him sometime," Orvil said.

At least, that's what I think he said. I was half asleep by then. When I woke up enough to glance over at Orvil, he had leaned back and closed his eyes. A moment later, so did I.

There's something about the sound of iron wheels clacking over rail joints that can put you to sleep if you listen to it long enough . . . and get used to it.

Especially if the rails are headed West.

Author's Note: In researching the hobos, I found that newbies in some regions of the country were called "gaycats." The old hands called themselves "dingbats." As time has completely altered the meanings of these two words, I struggled with being authentic versus what might be best and less distracting for readers. I decided to coin a word I thought worked just as well for the newbies. I didn't have a need for an updated word for the old hands. I was surprised to learn—from good authority—that as many as twenty-five percent of the hobos in that period were as young as the boys in my story.

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OIL SLICK

JAY BROOKS

Andy lumbered out of the hot tub like an astronaut stepping onto the moon. Rubbing his thinning hair with a towel, he sat down in one of the loungers facing the Olympic pool.

"Nothing like the whirlpool after a good workout, right? I don't think we've met. I'm Andy Belton."

I introduced myself. We hadn't met, but I knew him. He'd played pro football for ten years after college and had been in two Super Bowl games. After four years as a network color commentator, he'd married, according to my research, very well indeed. He'd picked up thirty or forty pounds since his playing days, and his fleshy body could use all the workouts that The Desert Palms Spa and Health Club could provide. Ice clinked as he poured himself a drink from a Thermos. Somehow I didn't think it was lemonade.

"Hot enough for you?" he said.

"Arizona's not that bad. Venezuela was worse; just as hot and wet to boot." As I hoped, the mention of Venezuela roused his curiosity.

Now I started the tale. I let Andy tease out my experiences with the big oil companies in Mexico, Venezuela, and Chile. I told him a few funny stories and let slip that I was no longer employed by the majors.

"You're retired then?" he asked.

"I work mainly for myself now," I answered.

The *mainly* is the hook. I'm working the Oil Game. It's a simple scam but reliable and one of the few long cons that don't require a team. I don't need a steerer or a talker, and I cool the mark myself.

He bit on the *mainly*. I admitted that four or five times a year, I scouted out some likely property, leased it, and formed a small group to drill for gas or oil.

"And that provides a comfortable living," I concluded. *Comfortable* is the right word, low key but promising.

"So you hit pretty often?" he asked.

"Well, out of my last forty wells, thirty-one are producers, seven paid their way, and two were dry."

Andy whistled. "You must be loaded!"

"Well first of all, we lose twenty percent leasing the well to a production

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company, but that avoids storage and distribution costs. Then I have to pay my partners. At any rate, nobody who started with me has to work for a living anymore."

"Started with you? You mean . . ."

"Oh yeah, several people have rolled their profits over three or four times, and they haven't been sorry."

Nothing I had said constituted any kind of guarantee, but I could almost see his mind working. *Thirty-one out of forty producing wells; profits rolling over . . .*

On this scam, so far I had nine other investors who, unbeknownst to each other, had put up twenty to thirty thousand apiece. After I roped Andy in, I'd start drilling with an old rig I'd leased cheaply from a tapped-out wildcatter. After three weeks or so, I'd regretfully announce our lack of success and close up shop with the money, about two hundred large after expenses.

"I've really enjoyed talking to you. I'd like to hear more about your operation," Andy said. "Come on out to the house this Saturday. We're having a garden party. It'll be at about eight . . . to avoid the heat, you know."

"That would be great. I'll look forward to it. Just give me some directions." I already knew where he lived. His house was in a posh gated community built around a country club.

Saturday I stopped at a florist and picked up the bouquet that I'd ordered. The bouquet was small but rich in color and fragrance. It was tasteful and expensive. A thickly treed access road led to the community gatehouse. The gate guard had my name and checked my identification carefully before he raised the steel gate. I drove past swollen houses built to impress with wide, green lawns running down to the curb. Andy's house looked like a floodlit stucco wedding cake on two acres of manicured desert. A parking valet met me at the curb and gave me a ticket. I walked up the wide flagstone walk to the open front door. The air conditioning was still going full blast. The two-story entrance hall looked and smelled like a refrigerated greenhouse.

Andy stepped out of what appeared to be a living room. His smile was strained, but he appeared to relax when he saw me.

"Great to see you. Let me show you around." We walked though the immaculate formal living room into a smaller room with comfortable chairs, sofas, and hassocks. The lighting was indirect, and vaguely Eastern music played from concealed speakers.

"Pretty nice, yeah? Look at this." At the press of a button, a huge screen descended down the wall directly in front of the seating. At the touch of another button, two football teams appeared on the screen playing in what appeared to be a blizzard. "That's from my last pro season. On this next play, I . . ."

I never found out what happened on the next play.

A firm voice with the crack of a whip interrupted, "Turn that off! I told you to save those tapes for your drunken football buddies. Nobody else is interested your athletic history, such as it was."

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She walked into the entertainment room like an inspecting general. Her dress hung with that Grecian simplicity that cost a bundle but looked casual. I couldn't tell her age, which I imagine was the point. Her taut, unlined face spoke of botox or plastic surgery rather than youth.

Andy introduced me. A quick, creaseless smile flashed across her face. My gift of flowers got the briefest of glances and no comment. She turned her attention to Andy.

"Did you get the pomegranate nectar? I told you the caterer wouldn't bring it. Never mind. I'll take care of it. You go into the kitchen and make sure they've got fresh calamari for the salad. Fresh, I said, and don't get anything on your shirt."

Duty done, she sailed out of the entertainment room toward the front door like an elegant sloop with a following wind.

"Stella's a little upset," Andy explained. "She invited a lot of important people, and she . . ." His explanation trailed off with a shrug.

Clearly Andy and I didn't fit in the important people category. He lumbered off to his duties while I meandered out to the broad teak deck to get a drink. I asked the bartender for a club soda with a splash of cola. That's my working drink.

Well-groomed, well-dressed people sauntered across the garden. A quartet played in a gazebo surrounded by raised beds of flowers. A hum of conversation came from the tent where the caterer had set up the buffet.

Andy came out of the kitchen into the living room and hurried onto the deck. He led me off the deck into the garden. He introduced me to two or three couples, all of whom were somewhat the reverse of Andy and Stella. The men were in their fifties or sixties with the wives fifteen to twenty years younger. They were cordial to Andy and me in a casual, offhand way. No one engaged us in conversation; they appeared much more interested in each other. Their clothes and bearing reeked of money. The cost of their wristwatches alone would feed me lavishly for a year. Some of the gentry looked like promising prospects, but I had to concentrate; Andy was tonight's target.

"Look," Andy said. "Could we talk in private for a minute?"

He steered me back onto the deck and into the entertainment room. Crossing in front of the darkened screen, we entered an inconspicuous door into a small office. On the wall behind the desk, two crossed sabers hung over some framed historical documents. On the side wall were pictures of Andy in football uniform from college to the pros, plus some shots with celebrities. Two trophies stood on the desk. The room could barely hold the desk, his chair, and the one I took in front of the desk.

"Look, I've been thinking about your oil proposition."

"Whoa, Andy. I didn't make any proposition. I've just barely finished my survey work."

"I know . . . but I'd really like to get in on the ground floor. Things haven't been going too well for me lately."

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I could imagine. Stella seemed to treat him like someone between a servant and an unruly child.

Andy sighed heavily. "I need to get back in the game. You know, put some points on the scoreboard."

I knew. He had to reestablish himself as a winner. He was looking for the pot of gold, and I was the man with the map. Andy was well and truly hooked. Now I could work him.

"Andy, I usually have four to six partners to spread the risk." He didn't need to know that I already had nine. "If it's going to be just you and me, I'll need a good chunk of front money."

Andy frowned. "What'll it take to get the operation going?"

Now my experience came into play. I had to name a figure that seemed plausible but was still affordable. I paused for effect.

"With my thirty thousand, another seventy thousand should do it. You get sixty percent; I get forty." You can't get too generous with a mark; they get suspicious.

Andy took a deep breath and said, "Okay, I can handle that. Will a check be all right?"

"Certainly," I replied. "I'll have to wait until it clears before anything happens." We shook on it.

He laughed. "I feel just like I used to after I made a big play, kind of tingly and short of breath. Does it hit you that way too?"

"Every time," I said. I meant it, too, but not the way he did.

We met for lunch about a week later, and he handed over the seventy-grand check. Seeing the two signatures on the check, I looked at him questioningly. He grinned sheepishly and explained that most of his money was in a joint account. Stella had been reluctant to co-sign but finally had to admit Andy's right to his personal share of their account.

"Boy, will she be surprised," said Andy, grinning widely.

You don't know the half of it, I thought.

"Okay, Andy, today's the twenty-eighth. I had some luck finding an idle rig. He's on the way to the site now. As soon as this check clears, I'll pay him and start the drilling. We should have some results within two to three weeks."

"Perfect! Can you give me a map? I've never seen an oil well before."

I slid a map over. "Go down any time after Monday. It's about a two-hour drive, but take some water. It's in the boonies." Marks always relaxed for a while after they saw the rig in operation.

The check cleared, and I put the crew to work. After two weeks, it was time to pull the plug. I called the other investors and told them that technical problems made it necessary to quit drilling, but I'd be in touch when we could resume. With Andy, who thought he was my only partner, I went by the house. I wanted to cool this mark in person.

He took it hard. "Problems, what problems? What went wrong?" He twisted his hands as if they hurt.

"Look," I said. "We hit some granite substrate. The rig we've got can't

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handle the necessary drill bits without modifications."

He groaned. "Does this mean we won't hit any oil or gas?"

"No," I said slowly as I thought. "The granite's a cap, like a dome, over the oil shale. That's why nobody tapped this field before. The granite's actually a good sign." Marks need hope like corn needs rain.

"Look," Andy said, "I thought you'd have good news by now. I've got a big problem."

You *still* don't know the half of it, I thought, but I looked questioningly at him.

"That check I gave you wasn't for seventy thousand. I altered it from seven thousand. I thought you'd bring the well in by now, and I'd surprise Stella. She'll find out about the check when the bank statement comes in on the fifth of next month."

I thought, You poor bastard, but he interrupted my sympathetic musings.

"Can't we speed up the bit change? What would it take?"

If he was cheating his wife I had better speed my departure. Nothing good could come from sticking around, but Andy surprised me.

He opened a small wooden case on his desk. "You see this?" he asked. "This is the mate to the pistol that killed Alexander Hamilton." He pushed the wooden case toward me. Inside was a slender antique dueling pistol. "Feel the balance," he said, "Look at the bore, no pits or scratches. It's in mint condition. The owner of the other pistol offered me fifty thousand for it. Would that be enough?"

I couldn't pass this up. He was making it so easy. I returned the pistol to its case.

"Look, Andy. It'll cost sixty grand for the air transport, new bits, and the pipe. I'll kick in ten if you can get the fifty. Your percentage goes to seventy-five. Deal?"

"Great," Andy said, "I'll have it by Monday. Can you come by the house Monday night? Stella and the staff will be gone."

Monday night I came though the gate and drove toward Andy's place. Without the floodlights and the parking attendant, the house looked stark, dark, and lonely.

I walked to the front door which stood slightly ajar. I called out "Andy!" Walking toward the living room, I heard something move ahead of me. The sound led me into the entertainment room. I walked toward the open door of Andy's office. Suddenly I saw a flash of light though the doorway and heard a thunderous boom. Shock pinned me to the doorframe until someone ran over me like a city bus. When I got up, still holding the doorframe, I saw Stella sitting in Andy's chair lit by the desk lamp, her chest a red ruin and a look of wonder frozen on her face. Only the sound of a door slamming behind me brought me to my senses. Suddenly I knew. Somewhere close was a dueling pistol covered with my fingerprints, and the altered check would be near at hand. I heard a siren from the direction of the gate. It was too late to run. I was well and truly had, but I could almost admire the con. Almost.

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PANDORA'S MISTAKE

GILBERT M. STACK

"It's for real this time, Corey, me lad," Patrick assured the boxer. "Thunderin' Joe Bullock ain't no small town hero who's never been tested in a real fight. No, he's just like you—a solid professional bare-knuckle boxer making his living following the stage and rail lines. I've talked with some men who saw his last fight. He's a regular steam locomotive once he gets going. This time we'll have our hands full!"

Corey absorbed his trainer's words without really listening to them. Instead he was concentrating on the series of timing blows he was firing into Patrick's open palms. He knew the older man thought he was being encouraging, but Corey didn't need any further motivation. He was up and ready to knock this ex-slave on his backside and claim the best purse he had had a chance at since Denver.

"You're going to have to come in strong!" Patrick continued. "Take control straight from the start—never let him establish his rhythm. You can beat this boy, but he's going to make you work for it."

Corey had never quite understood the custom that referred to an adult man as if he was still a child. It made even less sense when that adult was Thunderin' Joe Bullock—two hundred fifty pounds of black steel forged in the shape of a man. But despite the Irish brogue that still thickened Patrick's speech, the old man had become very American in the way he viewed social customs.

A rapidly ringing bell interrupted Patrick's words and Corey's thoughts. Both men lowered their hands.

"Sounds like they're ready for us," Patrick said. "Let's go out there and show these locals what boxing really is."

Flat Rock, in the Idaho Territory, was an up-and-coming town in 1874. While the railroad didn't yet reach it, the stage lines did, and the local sheep ranchers used the town as a stopover on their way to market.

When the founders of the town learned that there were two professional boxers in the area, they had been quick to seize the opportunity to arrange a fight and host a festival. They'd assembled a good-sized purse for the prize and even built a decent open-air ring in the middle of the town square. The schoolhouse had been set aside as Corey's

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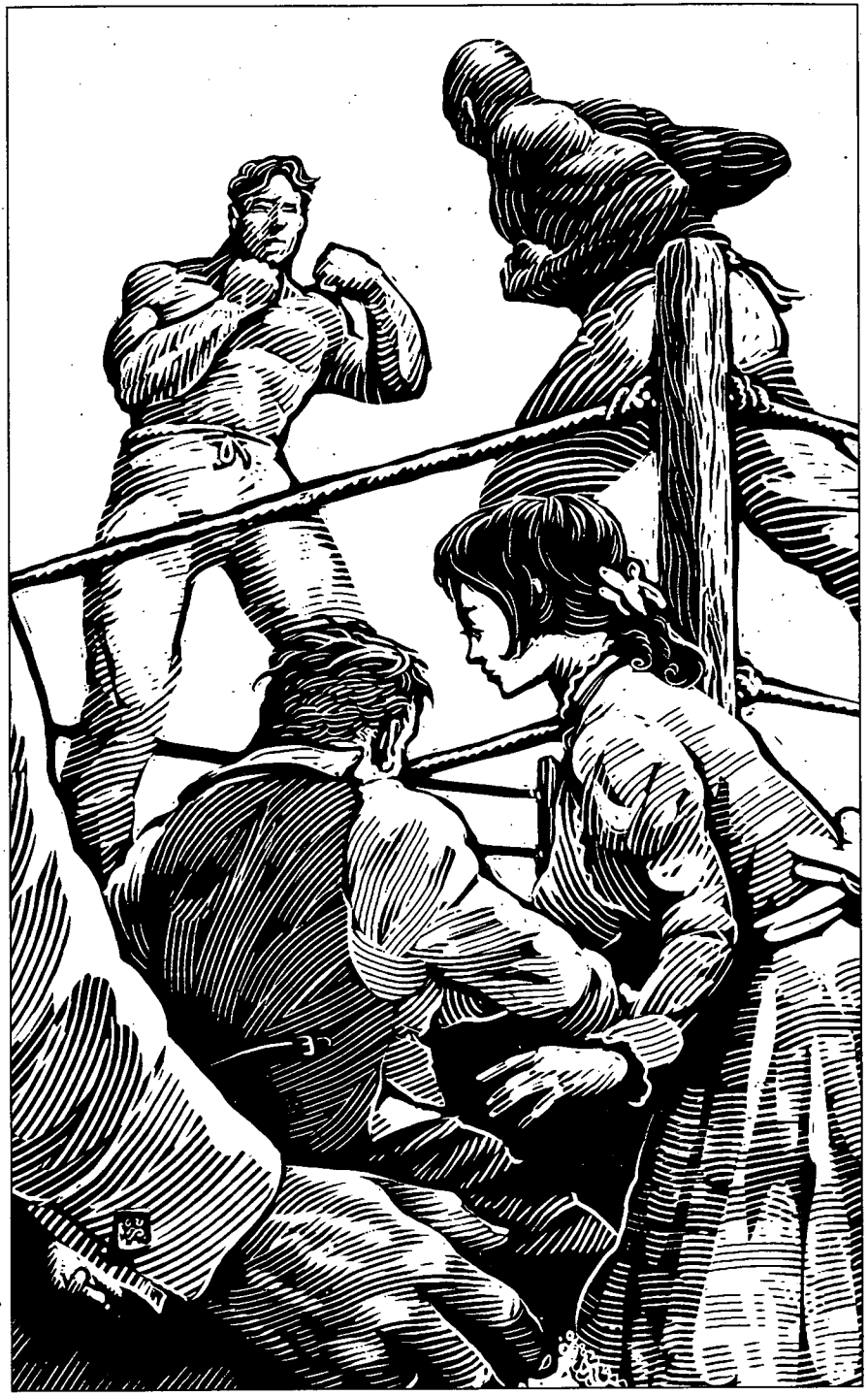

Tim Foley

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dressing room and the stables had made similar accommodations for Bullock.

Now Corey left the schoolhouse to the delight of the assembled crowd. He threw his hands high in the air in anticipation of victory and pranced across the green toward the ring.

Joe Bullock appeared at the far side of the square to a mixture of cheers and howls. He thrust his own arms high toward the sky and charged across the square toward Corey.

It was going to be a good fight. Everyone could feel it. Thunderin' Joe Bullock was as big as a mountain and looked twice as strong. Rock Quarry Callaghan was a powerful combination of strength, speed, and grace. The winner would earn his money today and be celebrating on the generosity of his fans until the wee hours of the morning.

Corey climbed between the ropes and into the ring. Miss Pandora Parson was standing in the front of the crowd completing her betting arrangements with several of the town's male citizens. Some of the bets that she was placing would be for Corey, so a victory today would pay twice as sweetly.

Joe Bullock clambered into the ring—a fine figure of a man with muscles rippling beneath his coal-dark flesh. This was going to be a fight to the finish.

"Remember now," Patrick advised. "You've got to hit him fast, knock him off his balance, and keep him from hitting his stride."

A bell sounded and the town's justice of the peace climbed into the ring. He held his arms up, asking for everyone's attention, then turned slowly in a circle until he had faced every corner of the square.

"Friends, neighbors, citizens of Flat Rock and Idaho Territory," he shouted. "Are you ready to see some boxing?"

Every one of the seemingly hundreds of people screamed "Yes!"

"In this corner, all the way from Ireland by way of Boston, Denver, and Cheyenne, we have the granite fists of Rock Quarry Callaghan!"

Again the crowd went wild. It was a grand feeling for Corey, being the center of all of these peoples' hopes for the afternoon.

"And facing him across the ring, from the cotton fields of Alabama, we have the incredibly dangerous Thunderin' Joe Bullock!"

Again that mixture of cheers and howls filled the square, but Bullock seemed just as pleased as Corey with his ovation.

The judge motioned to both men to join him in the center of the ring. "Now we're all here for a good show," he reminded them, "and we don't care what you have to do to each other to give it to us! Forty dollars is a lot of money! When the bell rings, I want you both to come out hard and earn it!"

The crowd cheered again and Corey and Bullock went to their corners.

"Remember now, Corey, me lad," Patrick cautioned. "Hit him hard and fast right from the start. You dictate this fight to him! Don't give him a chance to push back."

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The bell rang and Corey bounded into the center of the ring. Thunderin' Joe lumbered out to meet him doing a fairly good impression of a charging freight train.

Undaunted, Corey stood his ground, left fist jabbing out to take Bullock on the right side of the mouth.

An ungodly massive fist plowed back through the air to take Corey on the temple. It was only a glancing blow. Corey sensed the danger at the last instant and pulled back just enough to keep the punch from solidly connecting. But even so, the blow staggered him a half step to the right, and Thunderin' Joe stepped straight in behind it and hammered Corey with four more punches.

It was the unbelievable speed which unsettled Corey. Big men were strong and tough, but they rarely had that added touch of lightning that leaner fighters so often acquired. Thunderin' Joe Bullock had all three advantages, and he knew how to exploit them.

Corey ducked his head behind his arms to ward off the blows, but he couldn't get his feet planted firmly beneath him. His head was swimming and he knew that he needed to drop to the mat to give himself those few critical moments with which to pull himself together, but Bullock had Corey pressed up against the ropes and he literally couldn't fall to save himself.

It was already bad and starting to get worse. If Corey couldn't act, he would lose the fight here and now. Thunderin' Joe's fists were like sledgehammers to his head. Another few blows and the fight would be ended.

Reaching deep down into the core of his courage, Corey bulled himself forward and shoved Bullock back a step.

A high-pitched whine passed Corey's left ear followed by the sharp crack of a rifle. Thunderin' Joe grunted even as Corey pulled back in surprise. A line of blood welled up across the crease between Bullock's neck and shoulders. A sudden hush stilled the crowd. Every eye was on the two boxers and the bleeding wound on the black man's flesh.

A fancy-dressed man at the front of the crowd collapsed against the ropes, a bright red blotch blossoming across the front of his shirt. He hung there for a moment, arms hooked over the ropes, then his legs slowly gave way beneath him and his body slid to the ground.

A woman's scream shattered the silence, and pandemonium erupted behind it. Suddenly every person in the crowd was shouting and running off in a different direction. Most had the sense to run out, away from the ring and the presumed targets of the assassin, but others fought the sudden press of bodies, searching for missing loved ones in the throng.

Corey and Bullock stared at each other for a moment before their fighting reflexes reignited. Then they moved quickly past each other, scanning the crowd for the source of the threat while simultaneously looking for their own friends among the masses.

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Corey saw Patrick standing straight and tall, while his head whipped wildly back and forth as he tried to understand what was happening. Corey vaulted over the ropes to land beside the old man, then grasped him roughly by the front of his shirt and pulled him to the ground.

"What? Who? Why are they shooting at you?" Patrick sputtered.

Corey didn't stop to answer. With Patrick low enough to receive at least some cover from the ring he ran off in a crouch to search for Miss Parson. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Joe Bullock's back as the big man ran off with the dregs of the crowd, herding his grizzled trainer and the boy Corey thought was Bullock's son ahead of him.

Corey rounded a corner of the ring. The bulk of the crowd was truly gone now, making it easier to determine the identity of the people who had stayed. A few, like Patrick, were hugging the base of the boxing ring. Others ran frantically to and fro, unable to figure out that the people they were searching for had fled with the crowd. Miss Parson was huddled over the fancy-dressed man, trying desperately to staunch the flow of his blood with her all-too-delicate handkerchief.

Despite the apparent risk to himself, Corey dropped to his knees beside her to see if he could help. Blood was still spreading from the wound. It had saturated Miss Parson's small cloth and Corey in his boxing shorts had nothing with which to help close the wound. The stranger's life was literally flowing away in front of them, if it had, in fact, not already gone.

Patrick crawled up beside them. "Who do you think is shooting at us?" he asked. He was already pulling off his own shirt in a probably futile effort to save the dying man. The old trainer had treated a bullet wound once before, Corey remembered, but the blood had merely seeped from that injury. By contrast, this wound gushed.

"I don't know," Corey answered Patrick. "It's sure that there are enough people out there who hate us, but I didn't think any of them were around these parts."

They pressed Patrick's shirt against the wound and watched as it too began to soak with blood.

"Has he said anything?" Patrick asked.

Miss Parson shook her head. The man's face was growing very pale. "I wish we could do something for him."

"Where's the doctor?" Patrick asked. "Doesn't this town have one?"

"I hope he had the good sense to run like everyone else," Corey said. "Otherwise, this poor man is likely him."

"I don't think he's breathing anymore," Miss Parson whispered. "Poor unlucky man—he came to see a fight and got murdered instead."

Patrick pulled the cap off his head and held it against his own heart. "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, I think he's gone."

"God rest his soul," Corey whispered. He reached up and closed the dead man's eyes.

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All three were silent for a few moments.

"Do you think the killer is gone?" Patrick asked.

The question immediately reminded the three that they were still very vulnerable.

"We'd better hope he is," Corey said, "or he's likely to hit *us* the next time."

"It seems probable," Miss Parson stated in her calm, matter-of-fact manner, "or surely there would have been more shots fired by now. Hopefully the town marshal is searching the rooms and rooftops across the square to see if the killer left any clues to his identity."

"We were mighty lucky, Corey me lad," Patrick said. "If you hadn't fought your way off the ropes an instant before he pulled the trigger, you'd be dead and I'd be stuck in Flat Rock forever."

Miss Parson frowned. Clearly something in what Patrick had said troubled her, but it took her a moment before she decided to share it. "Or maybe it was Mr. Bullock who was lucky," she suggested. "He was, after all, the man in the ring that the bullet actually injured."

"That's just because it missed Corey," Patrick protested.

"Perhaps," Miss Parson considered. "It certainly could have happened that way, but we would still be wise to speak to Mr. Bullock about it."

"That's right," Patrick said, clearly thrilled that Miss Parson agreed with his analysis. "We've got to reschedule this fight just as soon as Bullock is fit. We've got a forty dollar purse to win."

Both Corey and Pandora stared at the old man for several moments, but he seemed oblivious to their disapproval. Finally, Corey turned to Miss Parson. "Why do you want to speak to Bullock?"

"Well I think it's obvious that we have to find this killer if we're going to be certain he's not going to shoot at you again. The marshal might catch him, but most small town law officers I've met aren't up to a challenge like this. They do quite well when they catch the culprit standing over the body with a pistol in one hand and a whiskey bottle in the other. But a case like this? No, I think if we want to really know what happened we had best depend on ourselves. We can bring in the marshal when we know who killed this man."

"And you think the place to start is Bullock?" Corey asked.

Miss Parson shrugged her shoulders. "It would certainly make things easier if someone here in Flat Rock had threatened to kill him."

"All right then," Patrick agreed. He poked up his head and looked around. "It seems like the killer's gone. Let's go find Bullock and find out who is behind this."

"Patrick," Corey said quietly. "We were the last people with this poor gentleman when he died. I think we should keep right on staying with him until the marshal arrives. It's the right thing to do, and the marshal might have some questions."

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"I don't appreciate you folks bringing your trouble to my quiet little town," Marshal Blake announced. He was a small man, thin and wiry, with a determined expression that suggested he believed he was a lot more competent than Miss Parson thought was likely.

"We don't like bringing any trouble," Corey told him.

"Well, we have a dead man here who says differently," the justice of the peace contributed.

It had taken about half an hour, but now most of the town's officials had found their way back to the square. There was Marshal Blake, his deputy, the justice of the peace, and the town mayor. Other citizens had begun to return as well, drawn like flies to the dead body.

"We don't actually know," Miss Parson observed, "that the murderer was shooting at Mr. Callaghan."

"The hell we don't!" the mayor shouted. "We've got three hundred people who saw him do it."

"Actually, Mr. Mayor," the marshal's voice was like an island of calm in the growing storm, "the little lady is right. There were two boxers in the ring. The killer might have been aiming at the colored boy."

"Then where is he?" a man in the crowd shouted.

"He ran off like the rest of you, Lou," the marshal said. "Don't you worry about it. He'll be around when I want to talk to him. It's not a crime to be shot at in this town, just to do the shooting."

The marshal turned back to Corey, Patrick, and Miss Parson. "So am I to take it you don't think the killer was gunning for you?"

"He might have been, Marshal," Corey answered. "I don't rightly know. The truth is that getting shot at was the last thing on my mind when the rifle was fired."

More than one person in the growing crowd chuckled.

"I'll bet it wasn't!" one of them shouted.

"He was beating you something fierce!"

"You're lucky the fight got called short!"

Patrick's face flushed deep with anger. "Now that ain't true!" he shouted. "My Corey wasn't finished. He was fighting back. You all saw it."

Corey put a calming hand on his trainer's shoulder. "It's all right, Patrick. They're partially right. Bullock's speed caught me by surprise. Can't blame them for not seeing the fight was a long way from over."

"Say," the mayor exclaimed, "maybe the little lady is right. Maybe the killer didn't plan to shoot anyone today, but when the fight started to go bad for Callaghan here he realized he was about to lose all the money he bet on him. So he grabbed a rifle, hightailed it to a rooftop, and shot to end the match. Poor Collins here was just an unexpected accident."

The crowd was quiet for a moment, considering the mayor's suggestion.

"It's an interesting idea, sir," Miss Parson suggested, "and it might work if the fight had gone on longer. But that's an awful lot for your killer to accomplish in the minute or two the fight actually lasted."

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The mayor was unconvinced by Miss Parson's logic. "I still think it's worth considering," he insisted. "What do you think, Blake?"

"I'll have to think deep on it," the marshal said. Corey couldn't tell if he was serious or not. "There just may be something to what you say."

The mayor beamed at the marshal's words.

So did Patrick. "Say, that means we've got nothing to worry about. As soon as that colored boy's scratch is healed, we can finish this match."

"It might be wise," the marshal observed, "for you to wait until I catch the killer first. That way he won't be taking another potshot at the boxers if the fight goes against him again."

The marshal's words hushed the crowd.

"Now what I want to do," the marshal continued, "is walk with the three of you back to my office so we can talk about who might dislike you enough to take a shot at you."

"You arresting them, Marshal?" a man in the crowd asked.

"Of course I'm not arresting them," the marshal retorted. "Do any of you really think that Callaghan here shot that rifle? I don't want to have to say this again: It is not a crime in Flat Rock to be the man that gets shot at! Now why don't you all let the doc here tend to poor Collins's remains? And Ben," the marshal turned to his deputy, "why don't you go find that colored boy and tell him and his manager to come down to talk to me?"

Marshal Blake extracted two names from Corey, Patrick, and Miss Parson: William Steed and Ted Perkins. Both had lost a lot of money because of Corey, and both might wish to see him dead. Neither man, as far as they knew, had ever been in Flat Rock, but a lot of strangers had come to town for the fight and it was fully possible that one or both of the men were among them.

As the three left the marshal's office, Thunderin' Joe Bullock, his son, and his manager were entering the building behind the deputy.

"Bullock," Corey greeted him.

Bullock accepted Corey's hand and the two men flexed to see which of them was weaker. They stared at each other while the pressure built and then, as if by mutual agreement, relaxed their hands and stepped apart.

"How's your neck?" Corey asked.

"Stings," Bullock answered.

"You know anyone who might be taking a shot at you?"

Bullock was silent, but his son wasn't. "A white man don't need no reason to shoot a colored man."

Bullock slapped the side of the boy's head. "You hush now."

Corey looked directly at the boy, meeting his eyes. He figured the child was about ten years old. "I guess that might be true for some folks," he said, "but it doesn't help us now if someone took a shot at your pa because he's colored."

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"I thought he was shooting at you," Bullock said.

"Might have been," Corey agreed. "The way we were moving he might have been aiming at either one of us. The marshal's taking names, but . . ." Corey spread his hands helplessly.

"I see what you mean," Bullock said.

"So are you up for another fight when we get this straightened out?" Patrick asked.

Bullock's manager stepped forward. "Is your boy that anxious to get his face pounded again?"

"We'll see who does the pounding next time," Patrick assured him.

"And it will be my Joe!" his counterpart answered.

"You are almighty fast," Corey told Bullock. "It took me by surprise."

"Knowing won't help you," Bullock promised. His lips split into a wide grin.

Corey loved the implicit challenge.

The marshal came out of his office to join them. "Save your fighting for the ring, people."

"This ain't fighting," Corey told him. "It's just managers shouting."

"You get out of here," the marshal told him. "I'm finished with you for now."

The order was firm, but there was no meanness in it. "You Bullocks get in my office. I've got some questions for you."

"Yes, sir," Bullock said, and stepped meekly toward the marshal's door. "Shame about that gent that got shot," he told the marshal as he passed.

"Yes, it is," the marshal agreed.

"Did he have family?"

"Thank God, no," the marshal muttered as the manager and Bullock's son filed past him. "He was too new in town. A lawyer, don't you know, just setting out his shingle."

The marshal closed his door and Corey could hear no more.

"So where do we start?" Corey asked.

They were standing on the street outside the marshal's office and he wanted to know which way they should go.

"I don't know," Miss Parson answered him.

Her admission surprised Corey. Miss Pandora Parson always seemed to know what to do. "Well, it doesn't look like the man was gunning for me unless he just came to town," Corey said. "If we keep our wits about us, we'll likely spot someone like Steed or Perkins or even Lightning Dan. So how do we figure out if the person is really after Joe Bullock?"

"That's just the problem," Miss Parson explained. "You both heard him in there. He obviously can't think of a single person who would follow him to Flat Rock and try to kill him, and we really can't either. I think I made a mistake at the beginning of this."

The very possibility of Miss Parson making an error brought a wide smile

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to Patrick's face. "Now Miss Parson," he said with a teasing lilt in his voice, "surely my ears just deceived me. Did you just confess to being wrong?"

Miss Parson did not find the situation nearly as amusing as Patrick did. "I just think we're all going about this the wrong way. Because the bullet actually injured Mr. Bullock, we're all assuming that either he or Mr. Callaghan was the intended target. But what about the dead man? What about the man the murderer actually killed? Why doesn't anyone think he could be the one the killer wanted dead?"

They mulled that idea over for a moment, with Patrick actually rubbing his chin to help his concentration. "I don't know," the old man said at last. "This marshal seems to know what he's doing and he doesn't think that the lawyer was the man the killer was after."

"If you're right," Corey said, "then this really isn't our problem. We only felt we needed to look for the killer because he might be gunning for me. If he wasn't after me at all—"

"Now wait a minute," Patrick said. "Didn't the marshal also say that he didn't think we should hold the fight again until after he finds the murderer? I want that prize money! We have to help the marshal."

Miss Parson closed her eyes and took a deep breath. When she opened them again any detectable trace of uncertainty had departed from her. "I admit to some curiosity about why this man was killed, as well as some embarrassment that I was fooled into thinking he wasn't supposed to be the victim. Because Mr. Callaghan was nearly killed by the assassin's bullet, I think we have a legitimate interest in making certain of the facts. Why don't we go talk to the doctor and see if there's anything more he can tell us?"

"I can agree to that," Corey said, "as long as we stop and let me get properly dressed again before we go visiting."

Dr. Green worked out of a small house on the south side of the square which combined reception and examination rooms with living quarters. He was a small man with very tiny hands and very thick lenses in his glasses. His reception room was quite crowded when the three friends got there, with very little room for new arrivals.

"Oh, the poor, poor man," one matronly woman said as she dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief. "He was so young."

Patrick followed Miss Parson through the door and Corey squeezed in behind him and doffed his cap. *Squeezed* truly was the appropriate word. Dr. Green's reception room was that packed with people. Perhaps eight or ten women were huddled together in the center of the room talking excitedly while their husbands and fathers lined the perimeter conversing in far lower tones.

"What's going on?" Patrick wanted to know.

"It would seem," Miss Parson suggested, "that Mr. Collins is going to be dearly missed."

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Corey could understand her satisfaction. Two of the women were actually quietly weeping, but none of the husbands or fathers appeared particularly upset. The contrast was quite striking.

"What do you want to do?" he asked Miss Parson.

"Well obviously we need to speak with Dr. Green," Miss Parson said, "but I think I should speak with these women first. Why don't you and Mr. O'Sullivan talk to the men?"

She was off into the crowd before Corey could answer her. Patrick also immediately abandoned him, darting off to the right to join with the men there.

Corey could have strangled them both. Miss Parson and Patrick liked to talk, but Corey hated mingling with a crowd: Introducing himself, striking up a conversation, he simply hated all of it. He was a fighter, not a talker. He liked to work with his hands, not his mouth. So he stood uncertainly in the doorway, wringing his cap in his hands, until his size caught the attention of one of the men in the room.

"Aren't you Rock Quarry Callaghan?" the well-dressed stranger asked him. He was an older gentleman with thinning white hair. He crossed the room and clasped Corey good naturedly on the arm. "That colored boy nearly handed you your head this afternoon. I'll bet you were almost glad to get shot at to stop him pounding on you."

The words were said with a friendly smile, but Corey found his spine stiffening just as if the man had been scowling when he said it. "It wasn't as bad as all that," he said. "Bullock took me by surprise at first, but I was setting him back on his heels when the shot was fired."

"Well I wouldn't go that far," the man laughed, "but I'm willing to agree that the fight wasn't over yet."

He thrust out his hand. "I'm John Winslow. I own the Flat Rock Bank."

"Mr. Winslow," Corey acknowledged as he shook the banker's hand.

"There was a lot of excitement when you came to town," Winslow continued. "My new teller and his wife saw you fight in Cheyenne. Why that little filly might be your biggest fan. She convinced me to support the mayor's plan to host this fight. I invested quite a bit of money in it."

"Well we're already talking with Bullock," Corey told him. "We'll reschedule the fight. You won't be disappointed."

"Glad to hear it," Winslow said. "Hopefully without all this," he waved his hand at the room, "next time."

"Did you know Mr. Collins well?"

Winslow grunted. "He was pretty new. We already had a lawyer. I don't think there's enough work for two."

"Did that cause bad feelings?"

"No." Winslow was clearly dismissive of the notion. "Most everyone who matters continued to consult the judge. Just a few of the townswomen seemed to want to talk to Collins. I can't imagine what they thought they needed him for."

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"That is strange," Corey said, mostly because he felt Winslow expected him to say something.

"It is indeed," Winslow agreed. "You know, with all of these ladies here, we ought to be able to find out what they wanted."

Corey wasn't certain that Miss Parson would appreciate any interference in her conversations with the ladies. "I don't know if—"

"Nonsense!" Winslow cut him off before further raising his voice. "Baker? Get over here!"

A thin man with glasses appeared at the banker's elbow. "Yes, Mr. Winslow?"

"Find that pretty little wife of yours," Winslow said. "Callaghan and I have some questions for her."

Baker adjusted his glasses on his nose and examined Corey more closely. "Rock Quarry Callaghan?" he asked. "Yes, I believe you are. My wife is quite a fan of yours, sir. We saw you fight when you passed through Cheyenne. You quite captivated her, I'm afraid."

Corey was embarrassed. He'd never before been told by a man that his wife was captivated with him. What was worse, he could not, for the life of him, remember who Mrs. Baker might be. Truth to tell, Corey suddenly realized, he hadn't been paying much heed to women since Miss Pandora Parson had begun traveling with Patrick and him.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Baker," Corey offered, fumbling for the proper thing to say, "but I'm afraid I don't remember meeting you and Mrs. Baker."

"Oh, I don't think that we were ever formally introduced," Mr. Baker assured him. "We saw you fight a man called Pistol Pete, and my Alice has been talking about you ever since. If I'm to be completely honest, I think she's become a bit overly fond of the manly sport you engage in."

"Well now," Winslow butted his way back into the conversation, "we can't blame you too much if you overindulge that pretty little thing now and then. Why don't you go find her among those women and let us ask her a couple of questions?"

Mr. Baker turned to do as his employer directed, but it proved to be unnecessary. A squeal of delight sounded from across the room and a young female form darted over to them.

"Mr. Rock Quarry Callaghan!" The woman almost shouted Corey's name in her excitement. "I am so pleased to meet you." She caught Corey's right hand between her two and pumped it up and down in what felt to Corey a most unseemly handshake.

Mrs. Baker was not through talking. "I saw you fight in Cheyenne," she told him. "They said Pistol Pete was supposed to be fast but you made him look like cold molasses."

Corey's face was flushing with embarrassment. He had no idea what to do in this situation. The woman's husband was frowning behind her. Winslow bore a look of startled amusement, and the rest of the room was beginning to forget its grief over Collins and turn to watch what was happening.

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Corey extricated his hand from Mrs. Baker's grip and tried to step back and put more space between them. "Well Joe Bullock is as fast again over me."

"You are so modest," Mrs. Baker said. She stepped forward with Corey's retreat, keeping the space tight between them. She wasn't exactly touching him, but she was definitely standing closer to him than felt appropriate. "I saw the fight," she reminded him. "I was right there beside the ropes watching you. Thunderin' Joe started out with the advantage but he'd played his hand. You were about to start pouring the pain back upon him."

That was true, Corey thought. He really believed that he was about to turn the tables on Bullock. But somehow, the devoted look in Mrs. Baker's eye didn't convince him that she understood this.

"You're one of those boxers, aren't you?" a woman demanded. It was the same woman who had been bemoaning Collins's fate as Corey, Patrick, and Miss Parson had entered the house.

Corey's fingers fidgeted on his cap. "Yes, ma'am, I am."

"How dare you come here!" she shouted. "The menfolk all say that a bullet meant for you killed poor Mr. Collins."

"Well I—" Corey began.

Mrs. Baker leapt to Corey's defense. "How dare you even think such a thing? I was in the crowd. I saw the whole thing. Why I was standing right next to Mr. Collins when the bullet struck him. It wasn't Mr. Callaghan the assassin was aiming at, it was that colored boxer, Thunderin' Joe Bullock."

The matronly woman took a deep breath to continue arguing. For the moment, Mrs. Baker's attention was on her and not on Corey. The boxer saw his opportunity and hurried to escape the room.

The sun was setting as Corey stalked away from the doctor's house and into the square. The newly constructed ring continued to dominate the field, and Corey's love of the sport and interest in the shooting naturally drew him back to it.

A passel of boys were gathered around it, ranging in age from maybe six to sixteen. Two of the older boys were circling each other within the ropes, fists held high and dreaming of the day that they might fight before hundreds of people as Corey had today.

Corey watched them from a distance, wanting neither to interrupt nor to be recognized. He liked to be a hero to young men, but his performance against Bullock had been weak enough that he feared he might be the goat to them instead. The boys in the ring had no training, but they made up for that with heart, circling around each other and then throwing a flurry of punches that often knocked one or the other of them down.

As Corey watched he tried to remember his own brief battle with

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Bullock. Thunderin' Joe had been pounding him against the ropes on the north side of the square. Collins had been standing in the west right up against the ring near the corner. The shot, therefore, must have come from the east, either from the windows of Flat Rock's only hotel, or the roof of the hotel or one of the neighboring buildings.

How early had Collins taken his place to view the fight? It would have taken a lot of time to reach the perch that let the killer have a shot at him. Not to mention that he also had to think of the plan and fetch his rifle before trying to carry it out.

He?

With sudden dread, Corey realized that the killer didn't have to be a jealous husband or an angry father. With so many female admirers, Collins might just as easily have run afoul of one who felt she'd been jilted or neglected.

Corey focused his attention on the rooftops again. They all looked pretty much the same with their peaked roofs to keep the snow from piling too high upon them. Only the hotel was noticeably different than the bank, the general store, and the barber shop, and that was a matter of height and not shape.

Could he really picture a woman in her dress and skirts climbing onto one of those roofs to shoot a man? Were the second-story hotel windows really high enough to give a good shot? Corey wasn't a marksman. He just didn't know enough to tell for sure.

"Penny for your thoughts, Mr. Callaghan."

Corey turned to find Miss Parson had quietly stolen up beside him. "How did it go in there?" he asked.

Miss Parson laughed, a genuinely merry expression. "Well Mrs. Baker appears heartbroken that her boxing idol departed so suddenly, but I think that she is alone among the womenfolk in this particular view. Most, if not all, believe that Mr. Collins was slain by a bullet intended for you. Just what should be done about that they have yet to agree upon."

Corey watched Miss Parson's expression carefully as she spoke. She was very happy about something. She must have learned something positive while mingling with the women in that room.

"But you still don't agree with them," he ventured.

"Indeed I do not," she answered. Her smile was radiant. It transformed her from a remarkably pretty woman into a true beauty.

"And . . . " Corey prompted her.

"Let's just say that while the women in that room might be in mourning, their husbands and fathers are not. I might go so far as to speculate in private that most of those husbands and fathers have reason to be relieved that Mr. Collins is gone."

"Only most?" Corey asked, a wry grin forming on his face.

"Well I can only speculate on the actual numbers," Miss Parson reminded

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him, "but Mr. Collins had clearly picked up a rather large number of admirers for a man who'd been in Flat Rock only a few short months. Most of the women in that room were clearly *very* fond of him. If I were a husband, I wouldn't like that."

"So you're sure now Collins was supposed to be shot?" Corey asked.

"Well I still have no actual evidence," Miss Parson admitted, "but as you know, I am a woman who enjoys making a wager, and I would bet the farm on this. It's the only theory that makes any sense."

"Glad to hear it," Corey said. It felt good to think that a rifleman was not out there waiting for another chance to shoot at him. But they still needed to identify the killer if they were to get another chance at that prize purse. "So how do we find out which husband did it?"

"I haven't figured that one out yet," Miss Parson told him. She was clearly enjoying herself. She had always liked a good puzzle. "But I will. Maybe we'll learn something important when they bury him tomorrow."

The whole town of Flat Rock and most of its visitors turned out to bury Mr. Gerald Collins. This offered both advantages and obstacles to Miss Parson in her efforts to investigate his murder.

The advantages were obvious. Just about every conceivable suspect had gathered together in one place, giving Miss Parson access to everyone. The disadvantages were equally evident—just about every conceivable suspect had gathered together in one place. There were quite simply far too many people to adequately observe or question.

Thunderin' Joe Bullock was also at the funeral, as visible for his dark skin as he was for his size. He stood in the rear of the crowd and seemed at pains not to draw overmuch attention to himself. A white bandage covered the wound on his neck, but nothing about his movements suggested the cut was bothering him. Corey wanted to skirt the crowd and go stand with him. It wasn't because they were friends—they weren't—but because Bullock was another boxer. In this crowd of mourners who were out for a spectacle, that gave Corey far more in common with Bullock than with anyone else here excepting Patrick and Miss Parson. He settled, however, for keeping his place on the outskirts of the crowd and nodding to Bullock across the heads of the people of Flat Rock. He was glad that Bullock returned the gesture.

"Where do you want to start?" Patrick whispered to Miss Parson.

"I'd like to talk to Mrs. Winslow again," she whispered back. "She is a very wealthy woman in Flat Rock and was clearly fond of Mr. Collins. The roof of the bank would also make an excellent platform for the shooter if Mr. Winslow wished to forcefully object to the object of his wife's interests."

"I guess I could ask around and see if anyone saw Winslow in the crowd at the time of the shooting," Patrick suggested.

Corey watched a look of utter consternation cross over Miss Parson's

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face. He had seen her error immediately, of course. Patrick couldn't keep secrets, and in his eagerness to help, he would likely tell the whole town that Miss Parson thought Mr. Winslow had shot Mr. Collins. She hadn't said she suspected him, of course, but that was how Patrick would see it.

"Oh, Mr. O'Sullivan," Miss Parson said. "Please don't—"

"I'll try to keep him out of trouble," Corey assured her.

"What?" Patrick asked.

"I would so very much appreciate it," Miss Parson told Corey.

"I'll do my best," Corey assured her. "Why don't you go find Mrs. Winslow? I'll drag Patrick with me and go talk to Bullock."

The simple gratitude on Miss Parson's face touched Corey deeply. Then she turned and slipped deeper into the crowd.

"I only want to help," Patrick told Corey. "The sooner the marshal arrests somebody, the sooner we can reschedule the fight."

"Oh, Miss Parson knows you're on her side," Corey assured Patrick. "But you know how she is. She's right clever, and she really enjoys figuring out a puzzle. She just doesn't want you solving it for her."

"I hadn't thought of it that way," Patrick admitted. "I can see where that might be a problem for her. Still, maybe I should just ask a few questions real quietly. I don't have to tell her the answers. That way she can still work things out on her own."

"Oh, Mr. Callaghan," a high-pitched female voice called over the low roar of the crowd. "Mr. Callaghan!"

Corey looked around to find Mrs. Alice Baker emerging through the throng to step between him and Patrick, forcing Corey to step back so she would not be physically pressed against him. She stepped forward as he moved, maintaining the same awkward closeness she had preferred the night before. "Oh, Mr. Callaghan," she said, "I was so hoping to see you here this morning. I—"

Patrick sidled his way back next to Corey and interrupted Mrs. Baker. Taking the cap from his head, he said, "I don't believe I've had the pleasure of meeting you yet, miss. Corey, me lad, have you been holding out on me? Who is this lovely woman?"

A range of expressions were fighting for ownership of Mrs. Baker's face: irritation at being interrupted, pleasure at Patrick's flattery, and curiosity as to the identity of the old man.

"Patrick, please allow me to introduce *Mrs*. Baker. Mrs. Baker, this is my manager and trainer, Mr. Patrick O'Sullivan."

The instant that Mrs. Baker half turned to acknowledge Patrick's presence, Corey shuffled a foot farther away from her.

"The pleasure is all mine, Mr. O'Sullivan. What a fighter you've produced. Why just look at him. He's the perfect model of a man: tall, broad, strong, and *so* forceful."

Patrick warmed to Mrs. Baker immediately. "Aye, that he is. The finest boxer I have ever trained. The stories I could tell you—"

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"And I'll want to hear every one of them," Mrs. Baker announced. "In fact, you and Mr. Callaghan will have to join me at the potluck following the funeral. The whole town will be gathering to remember poor Mr. Collins."

"Why that is right hospitable of you," Patrick said, his face beaming at the suggestion. "Corey, me lad, why didn't you tell me about this invitation?"

Corey forewent kicking Patrick in an effort to shut him up. "Just where is *Mr.* Baker?" Corey asked.

"Mr. Baker?" Patrick repeated, suddenly realizing the situation was a bit more complicated than he had originally assumed.

"Oh, he's probably following after Mr. Winslow," Mrs. Baker told them, dismissing her husband from the conversation. "He lets that man order him all over the place just because he works for him. Poor Eugene just isn't a *forceful* man like you are, Mr. Callaghan."

Corey found that Mrs. Baker had stepped right up against him again so that he couldn't take a deep breath without brushing against her. She stared up into his face with such adulation that it actually unnerved the boxer.

Patrick unwittingly came to Corey's assistance. "So you know Mr. Winslow," he ventured. "Do you remember seeing him when Mr. Collins was killed?"

"Mr. Winslow?" Mrs. Baker asked.

"Yes, we were wondering if—"

Remembering his promise to Miss Parson, Corey forced himself to interrupt. "Where were you when Mr. Collins was shot, Mrs. Baker?"

As Corey had feared, Mrs. Baker was eager for the chance to turn back and face him. "Oh, I was standing right beside him. It was just terrible. One moment he was talking with Mrs. Winslow while I watched the fight and the next he was crumpled against the ropes dying."

Nothing in Mrs. Baker's demeanor suggested she'd found the terrible incident anything other than exciting.

"You and Mrs. Winslow?" Patrick asked. He smacked his chops, certain that he had discovered crucial evidence that Miss Parson needed.

Corey cut him off again. "Where were your husbands?" he asked. "It's lucky that one of you wasn't killed instead."

Mrs. Baker waved her hand, dismissing Corey's suggestion. "Not that they could have done anything. They're not *real* men like you, Mr. Callaghan. They're always around underfoot until you actually find a need for one of them."

"So they weren't there?" Corey asked. Perhaps Patrick really had found the information Miss Parson needed.

"Oh, John was around somewhere," Mrs. Baker said. She didn't appear to realize she had just slipped and called her husband's employer by his Christian name. "But he probably had Eugene off running errands. He's very good at giving Eugene orders." Mrs. Baker's expression turned wistful. "Sometimes I think there's hope for John."

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All of a sudden, Mrs. Baker appeared to remember who she was speaking to. "But that has nothing to do with you, Mr. Callaghan. We already know you're a man. Why don't we meet by that tree over there after the funeral so we can go to the potluck together?"

Once again, Corey found his throat tightening with discomfort. He didn't like the way Mrs. Baker was looking at him.

Patrick, on the other hand, clearly thought the situation was funny. "Oh, we'll be there, Mrs. Baker. I'll see to that."

"You are such a treasure, Mr. O'Sullivan," Mrs. Baker told him.

"And we'll be bringing Miss Parson too," Corey added.

All the joy and adulation dropped instantly from Mrs. Baker's face. "Miss Parson?"

"The cute little redhaired lass who travels with us," Patrick told her. "She's around here somewhere. Let's see if I can point her out for you."

"Yes, do," Mrs. Baker instructed him.

Corey began to regret having mentioned Miss Parson's name. This sudden coldness in Mrs. Baker was even more unsettling than her gushing adulation. But there was nothing to be done about it now. "There she is," he told her as he pointed into the crowd. "That's her talking to Mr. and Mrs. Winslow."

Mr. Baker stood beside the three, but he did not appear to be listening to their conversation. Instead, he was staring straight back at Corey with a noticeable frown.

"And there's Mr. Baker," Corey announced. "Are you sure he won't mind you inviting the three of us to join you this afternoon?"

"Never mind him," Mrs. Baker said. Her voice was still cold and flat. "He'll take what I give him. He's not man enough to do otherwise."

"It's Mr. Winslow," Miss Parson whispered. "I'm certain of it. I had a very pleasant conversation with his wife. He didn't approve of her growing friendship with Mr. Collins, and she remembers he and Mr. Baker stalking off to 'take care of some business' just before the fight. Of course, she doesn't realize that I suspect him."

"That's great," Corey told her. "Um, I'm not certain if this will help or not, but Patrick sort of accepted an invitation for us to join the Bakers at the potluck."

"The Bakers?" Miss Parson asked, her eyebrow arching.

Corey felt the blood rushing to his face. "It wasn't my idea! But as long as we're going, I thought it might be helpful to you in finding the killer. Mr. Baker does work for Mr. Winslow."

Miss Parson examined Corey, poorly concealed amusement twisting her lips. "I am quite certain that concern for my curiosity is the only thing that motivated you."

Her expression turned pensive. "The Bakers appear to be a very odd couple. He's rather mousy for a woman of her outspoken preferences. I

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wonder how they came to be together. Do you know if they have any children?"

"None have been mentioned," Corey answered.

"It would be interesting to know," Miss Parson said, "but it hardly impacts on the matter at hand. Perhaps if the potluck becomes too . . . crowded, you can slip out and tell Mr. Bullock we believe it to be safe to fight again."

Much to Corey's horror, Miss Parson got along just fine with Mrs. Baker. He wasn't quite certain how she did it. One moment Mrs. Baker was staring daggers at the pretty redhead and the next, Miss Parson was taking Mrs. Baker by the arm and guiding her a few steps away from the men.

"Mr. O'Sullivan tells me you are Mr. Callaghan's greatest admirer," Miss Parson gushed. "I can't tell you how happy it makes me to hear that. You know that those two are the only family I have—just like my own father and brother. It does my heart good to see someone noticing their worth."

Somewhere in the midst of that sugary speech, Mrs. Baker seemed to warm to Miss Parson. Her blond head dipped closer to Miss Parson's red, and the two were off and whispering and all the while staring at Corey Callaghan.

A hand tapped Corey on the shoulder as he tried to figure out what to do now that he had lost what he had supposed was his sole ally in the struggle to evade Mrs. Baker's attention. Turning about, Corey found the unsettling woman's husband standing behind him.

"Mr. Callaghan," Mr. Baker said, "I must insist that you stop encouraging my wife's unfortunate infatuation with you."

"What?" Corey could not have been more astounded by the accusation. Encouraging her? He'd been doing everything in his power to push Mrs. Baker away.

"I will not stand for it," Mr. Baker said.

Mrs. Baker had evidently caught sight of her husband conversing with Corey, for she broke away from Miss Parson and came charging over beside them. "I warned you, Eugene, do not bother Mr. Callaghan!"

"And I told you, Alice, I will not stand for it."

Corey retreated a step to let the couple bicker without him. Honestly, purse or no purse, he was ready to put Flat Rock behind him.

"And just what are you going to do about it?" Alice snapped. "Hit him? Fight him? Defend my honor?"

"I am your husband, Alice. You have no cause to be speaking to me this way."

The marshal stepped up next to Miss Parson, watching the Bakers and Corey. In fact, everyone in Flat Rock seemed to be watching the three of them. Corey retreated further, looking for a way to get away.

"Don't worry about it too much, son," Mr. Winslow said as he stepped up beside Corey. "They were carrying on like this before she ever actually met you. It's why I had to send Baker back to the bank to go over the ledgers. People came to see *you* fight—not the two of them."

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"You sent Mr. Baker away?" Corey asked.

"Sure enough, his pretty wife likes to make him jealous. It seemed the right thing to do to separate them."

"And you didn't go with him?"

"And miss the fight?" Mr. Winslow asked. "Not after I put all that money into it. I watched it with the marshal—what little there was of it."

So Winslow wasn't the killer after all, Corey realized, and Miss Parson's theory was wrong.

"I can talk to any man I want to!" Mrs. Baker shouted.

Corey could see that it was well past time for him to leave, but Miss Parson would want to know what Mr. Winslow had told him.

"Would you do me a favor?" Corey asked the banker.

"If I can," Mr. Winslow agreed, still apparently amused by the marital squabble.

"Would you go over there to Miss Parson and the marshal and repeat what you just told me about sending Mr. Baker to the bank?"

"I suppose I could do that," Mr. Winslow agreed. If he had any idea that Corey's request was connected to the murder investigation, it did not show on his face.

"Good." Corey looked over his shoulder, plotting his path to the door.

"You coming with me?" the banker asked.

"Rock Quarry Callaghan is ten times the man you are!" Mrs. Baker told her husband and the gathered crowd.

"I think I'd better not," Corey said, then fled through the crowd toward the far side of town.

Corey didn't know where to go after escaping the potluck. In truth, Flat Rock wasn't that big and he didn't have a lot of options. There was the boarding house off the square where he, Patrick, and Miss Parson were staying, but he didn't want to feel caged up. He decided instead to go look up Bullock at the barn loft where the man was sleeping and find out how he felt about staying on to fight.

Bullock and his son weren't there, so Corey exchanged friendly greetings with the manager and left again. He was only a few steps back out of the barn when Mr. Baker appeared in front of him. The determined expression on his face was matched by the serious looking rifle the man was pointing in Corey's direction.

"I told you, Mr. Callaghan," Baker began, but Corey wasn't waiting. At first sight of the rifle he understood what had really happened during the match and flung himself desperately back into the barn.

A shot rang out and Corey had no idea where it went or what it hit.

"I told you, Mr. Callaghan," Baker repeated as he jacked another round into the firing chamber. "I just won't stand for it."

"What the— What's happening?" Bullock's old manager shouted.

"It looks like the killer is still trying to kill me," Corey shouted back.

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"Kill you?" the old man shouted. "Then get out of here!"

"The old man's correct, Mr. Callaghan," Baker said. He had yet to truly raise his voice. It appeared that unlike his wife, Mr. Baker didn't enjoy shouting. "You should come out and take your medicine."

A silhouette appeared in the barn door—a fine target for a person who carried a gun and knew how to use it well.

Baker swung in Corey's general direction and fired into the shadows. Corey retreated deeper into the barn and hid behind a too-thin wooden post.

Baker stepped in after him, jacking another round as he moved.

"I never touched your wife!" Corey shouted.

The rifle swung about, trying to pinpoint where Corey's voice was coming from.

"I won't stand for it."

"Mr. Callaghan?" Miss Parson shouted, her voice ragged as if she'd been running. "Mr. Baker is—"

The rifle fired. The bullet came nowhere near Corey, and he forced himself to neither move nor speak in response. Baker's eyes would already be adjusting to the darkness. He had to think of what to do soon. He was rapidly running out of time.

"Mr. Baker, this is Marshal Blake. Why don't you put down the rifle and come on out of there?"

"Eugene?" It was Mrs. Baker's voice this time. "Are you really in there fighting for me?"

"I told you, Alice, I'm not going to stand for it."

"You're really in there!" she said. Her voice was flushed with pride and excitement.

Corey could make out Baker's blurry shape, a darker blotch in the lighter shadows near the door. If he could find something to throw he might distract Baker long enough to get near him.

"Mr. Baker," it was the marshal again. "You're only making things worse for yourself. Come on out of there."

Baker stepped deeper into the barn and closer to Corey. He was fidgety, nervous, and his voice contained a slight tremor when he answered the officer.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I can't follow that instruction just now. Besides, I've already killed one man. Killing another can't make things much worse."

There was a bucket on the floor about three feet from Corey. It was currently out of reach, but perhaps Baker was distracted enough by his conversation with the marshal that he wouldn't notice Corey moving.

"You don't mean Collins, do you? I'd have never thought that you were a good enough shot to hit him at that range."

Baker sounded bitter. "I am a terrible shot, Marshal. And I wasn't aiming at Mr. Collins. That was just an unfortunate accident."

The marshal actually chuckled. "Well I don't suppose it matters if it was on purpose or by accident. Half the men in town are glad that

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Collins is dead. I can't see finding twelve men for a jury who'd all be willing to convict you for it, although they might reward you with a round of drinks at the Hogs Head."

As the marshal spoke, Corey eased himself down into a crouch and carefully leaned forward to take hold of the bucket.

"Really?" Baker asked.

"I can almost guarantee it!" the marshal assured him.

There was a moment where Mr. Baker appeared to be considering the marshal's words, but when he spoke again there was a decisive quality to his voice. "I'm sorry, Marshal, but I can't accept your offer. I just can't abide the way this man is leading my Alice on."

"Oh, Eugene," Mrs. Baker said. Her voice purred with pleasure.

"Well let's just kick him out of town," the marshal suggested.

Corey threw the bucket. Baker was looking right at Corey, but the rifle followed the bucket and the bullet missed both targets.

Corey was out of his crouch and moving forward before Baker could bring the rifle back to bear upon him. His clenched fist cracked against the smaller man's chin, sending the rifle flying and Baker staggering backward to fall on his back in the entrance to the barn. The sunlight flashed off the glass in Baker's spectacles.

"You brute!" Alice Baker threw herself to her knees beside her husband and cradled his head in her lap. "You animal!" she continued, nearly growling the words as she stared into the barn at Corey. "You just punched a man wearing spectacles."

Mrs. Baker's comments pushed the marshal over the edge as his wide grin broke into bellows of laughter.

"I was simply mistaken," Miss Parson apologized. "It's just that it seemed to me that you had backed Mr. Bullock into that bullet. If he had kept you pinned against the ropes I didn't think either of you would have been shot. That meant Mr. Collins was most likely the intended target. It simply didn't occur to me that the killer might be a poor marksman."

She was sitting in Marshal Blake's office together with Corey, Patrick, and the marshal.

"I don't think you should be too hard on yourself," the marshal told her. "We all thought Collins was the target."

"But you said—" Patrick began.

"What else was I supposed to say?" the marshal interrupted. "Gerald Collins was a louse of a man, prying in among the womenfolk where he had no business being. He'd been warned but he wasn't listening. The only surprise is that the man who shot him was Baker. I still can't believe it."

"Is that why you let him go?" Corey asked. He had seen a lot since coming west and realized how little his life really mattered to most men out here. But a marshal letting a man go free the very same day that man had tried to kill him disappointed Corey nonetheless.

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"I didn't free him," the marshal corrected Corey. "I paroled him. Or actually, the judge did."

Corey opened his mouth to say something further, but decided there was no point.

"You afraid he might try for you again?" the marshal asked.

"The thought had crossed my mind," Corey admitted.

"Not tonight he won't!" the marshal assured him.

"How do you figure that?" Patrick asked. "It seems to me that Baker's already tried to shoot Corey twice. Maybe he'll feel he'll get lucky on the third time."

"Because tonight he's with Mrs. Baker," the marshal explained, "and it seems plain to me that Mrs. Baker's got—"

The marshal broke off with a sudden look at Miss Parson. He cleared his throat. "What I mean to say is . . ."

"What?" Patrick asked.

"If you'll permit me," Miss Parson offered. "I think that the marshal is trying to say that the revelation of Mr. Baker's killer instinct makes it likely that the Bakers have some . . . marital business to discuss tonight."

Patrick's eyes widened and his cheeks flushed. "Oh."

"So you see why I thought you'd have nothing to worry about tonight," the marshal finished. "I'll lock him back up during Callaghan's new fight with Thunderin' Joe just to be certain, but after that . . . Well there will be a trial but it's not likely the townsmen will convict Baker of killing Collins."

It made sense to Corey, but he was still bothered that the marshal seemed unconcerned by Baker's attempts to shoot him. "And you're not planning to try him for trying to kill me?"

The marshal shrugged. "That's completely up to you. Do the three of you want to stay in Flat Rock long enough to testify at the trial?"

The three friends didn't even glance at each other before answering, "No!"

"There you have it," the marshal answered.

"The morning after the fight," Patrick promised, "we'll all be on our way out of here."

For the second time in three days, Rock Quarry Callaghan and Thunderin' Joe Bullock faced each other across the ring. Bullock's neck was still bandaged, but the wound didn't appear to be bothering him none. Corey also felt ready. With both Mr. and Mrs. Baker sharing a jail cell for the afternoon, there was nothing to distract him from breaking Joe Bullock.

The bell rang.

Both men darted out of their corners, fists up and feet dancing.

Thunderin' Joe Bullock was fast as lightning.

But so was Rock Quarry Callaghan.

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MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

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A Vulture's-eye View

We will give a prize of $25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "March Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the September Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 109.

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200 BIG ONES

JOHN C. BOLAND

Bartels slowed his car as he approached the village. Though it was barely four o'clock in the afternoon, a glowing mini-mart sign cut fuzzy red circles in the mountain dusk. Ahead lay a single pumping island, and farther on several clapboard houses hugged the road beside a ravine that wrinkled down from the hills. A sign at the outskirts of the village, where the highway petered down to two lanes, had said WHIST POP 708. Bartels liked these upstate crossroads. Nine months ago and eighty miles south, he had found the Hepplewite. Mary Anne never understood, you had to dig hard to find the good stuff. This trip he was running three days behind. He had poked around in every attic and barn in Buckham County. Not quite desperate but getting that way.

Mary Anne didn't know antiques. The only one she'd ever latched onto wasn't really antique, just middle aged and fat.

He waited as a pickup truck fishtailed onto the road ahead of him, then he took its place in front of the mini-mart, got out, went inside, and stood on the wet cardboard that had snow melt on it. Then he saw that on one corner, near the beer fridge packs, blood had soaked the cardboard black.

Henry's blood. That was the name on the pocket, HENRY, of the man who lay on the floor in a blue-striped shirt and green work pants, arms splayed the way kids do to make snow angels, at least two holes in the shirt, a pistol half under his left leg, so maybe he had come around the counter to argue. He had a grim face with sparse gray whiskers and smoker's wrinkles. An argumentative-looking face, Bartels thought.

It was a small market. No security camera that he could see. Back past the pet food would be a door to a stockroom. Maybe an alley for filling the drinks cooler from behind. He could see through a connecting glass door into the repair shop, where the single lift bay was empty. Corners in the repair shop were out of his line of vision. But the shooter probably wouldn't be hiding there. The way Bartels read it, the shooter had left in that scabrous pickup truck that burned out of the lot ahead of him.

His glance stopped at the cash register. The money drawer was closed. What kind of robber closed the drawer?

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There were two sheriff's deputies, middle-sized men with heavy belts. One held a shotgun while the other patted Bartels down and handcuffed him. "Where's the gun you used?"

It was never easy telling cops they had made a mistake. "If I robbed the place," Bartels said, "would I have called you and waited?"

What kind of robber closed the cash drawer?

"Jeanie Hanigan called us," the older guy said. But he lowered the shotgun. He had a big flat-brimmed hat that came down almost to his blond eyebrows. Pug nose, little inverted-U for a mouth, a regular Officer Sunshine. He moved aside to talk on the radio, then both cops turned their heads as the rust-spackled pickup slid to a stop on the road and a small woman popped out.

"You get him?" she cried, then slowed, did a double take at Bartels's car and said, "Ah, you bumpkins! That's the guy came in as I was leaving!"

"Maybe he come back to cover his tracks," said one deputy.

"Give it a rest, Lou," the older one said. "Office says we got a call from a Bartels too. Sorry mister. We're jumpy around here since the bank got hit. Jeanie, you got the news on the air?"

"For all the good it'll do." She had a ferret face and large teeth. Not bad even so. Nice hair in a ponytail, pert shape in blue jeans, snow boots, and some kind of blanket-plaid jacket that hung open at the front. She looked at Bartels, giving him some kind of appraisal. "Thursday the bank got robbed big time. Joey, that's the manager, went missing. That's his brother Henry on the floor."

"You mind showing some ID?" said Lou.

Bartels produced a driver's license followed by a business card.

The older deputy looked them over. "Bartels Antiques, New York City, huh? You're a long way from home, buddy."

"Buying trip. Some of the best opportunities are in small towns."

"You pay good money?" Jeanie asked.

"I don't give it away." But since she had got him cut loose, he smiled at her. "Do you have something?"

"Got a few things I'd like to get rid of, starting with my hubbie. Since you won't want him, we got a desk at the radio station that might be worth something."

Lou was watching him.

"I'll take a look," Bartels said.

They were clearing things up with the deputies—sorry, they hadn't seen anyone, except each other sort of—when a black SUV jerk-stopped on the road and a big woman came boiling out. She had popped eyes, wild gray-blonde hair. She hurled herself across the pavement, aiming at Bartels, screaming at the deputies, "Is that the man?"

Lou stepped to block her, which took some doing because she was both

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taller and wider than the deputy and she bounced him back a step. He said, "No, no, Katie! He's just a witness."

"Is my Henry really dead?"

"Yeah, Katie, I'm sorry."

She moved restlessly, ready for a go at Bartels just because he was there. "Sheriff Sully called, and I just couldn't believe it. Can't now. Henry never hurt nobody."

"Yeah, Katie, we know."

"Course, Henry never did nothing for nobody either," Jeanie Hanigan said. Bartels had followed her pickup down the two-lane to the radio station, where she was co-owner, assistant manager, news director and—as of this afternoon—crime reporter. The building was low, white painted, with display windows in the front so it could have sold snowmobiles like the building across the road. But the signs in the window said Mountain Fire Radio Network, the network consisting of a single low-power transmitter out back that sent a signal over about three hilltops. Jeanie's husband Roy was the manager. On Sundays and Thursdays, they opened the front of the little building for church services over which Jeanie presided, followed by a potluck supper that Roy organized.

"We'd prefer more traditional guy-and-gal roles," she said, "but I got ordained and Roy didn't. He was in the army. You must got a lot of money, living in New York City."

"I *spend* a lot of money living in New York," Bartels said. "That's not the same thing."

"We warn folks on the radio against that city, against any city, just in case some of them is tempted. Our town can't afford to lose more people. We're underpopulated."

"You got a robber in town," Bartels pointed out, "you could afford to lose one."

Roy Hanigan was one of the biggest men he'd seen off a football field, with a slightly rearranged face that suggested his time in the army—or somewhere else—hadn't always been on a winning side. He wore a patchy brown beard that hid some of the scars. His eyes were deepset and serious. He had a moth-eaten sweater over a wool shirt, faded jeans, heavy-soled boots.

Jeanie introduced Bartels as the "almost" criminal. "Lou and Howard figured they had their man."

"Lucky Howard didn't shoot you," Roy said. "He and Henry married the Everly sisters."

"Dead Henry?"

Roy nodded.

Thinking of the large woman struggling with the deputy, Bartels said, "Which boy got the big sister?"

"Katie and Imogene both have meat on their bones. But Imogene's an

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inch taller. She's the one married to Howard. You know who's boss in that family. It ain't Howard. Can't say Henry was in charge at his house, either."

"Can't say much about Henry at all," his wife said. "Losing him seemed to shake Katie. Guess something like that would shake me, if I didn't have burial insurance on my sweetie. You want to see the desk, Mr. Bartels?"

It was an oak rolltop of the sort he could pick up at any auction for a few hundred dollars. He offered the couple three fifty, which was full value but not so extravagant they would wonder. When they looked at each other, it was clear they had been hoping for more.

"Guess we won't do much better," Roy said. "And this little business sure needs the money."

Bartels wrote a check and said he would arrange shipping. While Jeanie took over the tiny control room and gave a folksy news update, Roy Hanigan chatted with Bartels about the radio station. The couple kept on the air from ten in the morning until six in the evening, playing recorded music most of the time. On Mondays there was a phone-in garden show, and sometimes on Saturdays Howard and Imogene Cross would come in, Imogene singing hymns while Howard played the guitar.

"Didn't happen this Saturday," Roy said. "Since the bank got robbed, the sheriff's people have been on the road twenty hours a day. Figure they're gonna find Joey Robbins dead if they find him at all. It's been five days, and there's been a freeze every night." Roy poured coffee from a thermos, handed a mug to Bartels. "They've searched through every barn and root cellar in the county."

"They think it was someone local?"

"It's a pretty good bet. If I was gonna come off the highway to rob a bank, I'd pick somewhere that looked bigger than this place. So the robber had to know there was money here. You had dinner? Suppose you want to get back on the road."

"I don't like driving at night," Bartels said.

"Lot of deer on the roads," Roy Hanigan agreed. "There's a place in the village that's open to seven if you want to eat. Not great food, except for the canned gravy."

"What about a motel?" Bartels said.

"Big chain up on the interstate, about five miles."

"Sounds good," Bartels said. "Can you and your wife join me for dinner?"

He followed the big-finned convertible that Roy Hanigan said he was restoring a mile and a half into the village, past the mini-mart and gas pump, where the lights were still on and more cars half-blocked the road. The Wig-Wam was a six-table, linoleum-floored room with pumpkin pie under a fogged plastic lid and a chewing gum rack at the cash register. Only one table was occupied. The glum-faced deputy, Howard Cross, sat with a tiny, florid man in a shearling jacket.

"Howard, you look beat," Roy said. "How's Katie taking it?"

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"Pretty good. She screamed I was a lazy, no-good moron and her sister should've done better." He pushed mashed potatoes into a deep gravy well. "That was after she calmed down."

The man beside him laughed.

"This is our alderman, Kenny Fogel," Roy said. "We're too small to have a mayor, so we got an alderman. Mr. Bartels bought our desk and decided to stay over. Running into Howard and Lou shook him up."

Howard nodded but didn't apologize a second time. The Hanigans and Bartels took seats at the neighboring table.

"Howard thinks we should've caught the guy that shot Henry," said the alderman.

"How so?" Jeanie asked.

"Katie talked to Henry about five minutes before you found him," said Howard. "Five minutes later, you'd called in and the dispatcher had the word out. That means the shooter didn't have much time to get away. So unless the bad guy drove straight up to the interstate, someone should have seen him."

"I came down from that direction," Bartels said, "and didn't see a car."

"That's helpful, Mr. Bartels. The deputies should have asked you." Fogel gave a squinty look at Howard that the deputy didn't meet. "So the shooter was on the county road at least until the Waubeeka turnoff. Unless he ducked in somewhere nearby."

"Could he have been on foot?" Bartels asked the deputy, just to get him talking.

"If he was on foot, he'd have been seen. Lou and the other guys searched behind the station. There's no footprints by the creek except all the ones they left."

"You're assuming it's a man," Jeanie Hanigan pointed out. "Women shoot people. For all you know, I coulda blowed Henry away before Mr. Bartels arrived."

"Can you shoot a gun?" Alderman Fogel asked.

"Good enough for that distance."

Howard made a face. "You and Roy are a little hard up for money, aren't you?"

"Who isn't around here?"

"So why'd you leave sixty-three dollars in the register?"

"Panicked."

The deputy looked at Fogel. "She's almost convinced me."

The alderman shook his head. "If she did it, Howard, you gotta cover it up. Can't have the county's only ordained preacher charged with murder. People over in Buckham County would talk."

The deputy nodded. "Guess you've lucked out, Jeanie."

They had dinner, and after Howard Cross picked up his hat and went back on duty, Alderman Fogel moved over to their table. He had bright eyes and an obvious curiosity about Bartels that he expressed by asking

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questions about the antiques business. Bartels answered the questions without overdoing the display of knowledge.

"My father had the store before me," he said over coffee, "but the business has changed."

"In what way?"

"Competition from imports is a lot stronger. What looks like a two-hundred-year-old desk may have been made in Indonesia last summer from reclaimed mahogany. No knowledgeable customer will be fooled, but it puts price pressure on the real thing."

"Because the knowledgeable customer will buy a look-alike?"

"Some of them will, yes."

Roy Hanigan leaned into the table. "Kenny, tell Mr. Bartels how much Joey Robbins had at the bank."

The alderman's face brightened with pride. "About two hundred thousand dollars. You didn't think a little place like this was worth that much, did you?"

"It's a lot of cash," Bartels admitted.

"What happened, two local banks got bought out. The new owner closed the Buckham County branches, so we're now a big financial center. It just doesn't show."

"Kenny means the money hasn't rubbed off on the rest of us," Roy said.

"It's rubbed off on somebody," said his wife.

"Hate to think one of our own kidnapped poor Joey Robbins and shot Henry," said Fogel.

"You assume the two events are connected?" Bartels said.

"Guess we all do. Something hinky's going on in town. Henry and Joey were brothers. Big coincidence if the two crimes aren't related." Fogel gulped his coffee. "I ought to be helping Lou and Howard make a list of suspects. You planning to start spending big, Roy?"

"I might buy me a new pair of jeans come spring."

"What about a Caribbean cruise?"

"We come back tan, Lou can arrest me."

After Bartels paid for dinner, they stood in the parking lot, Bartels and the Hanigans, snow landing on them with a little wind behind it.

"Where's the bank?" Bartels asked.

"Quarter mile that way," Roy said. "You wanna see it?"

It was a fairly modern cinderblock building, lit inside by a nightlight, front door covered with a big sign advertising rates.

"What happened," Jeanie said, "this fellow in a mask comes in right at four o'clock, shoots a hole in the ceiling and scares Missy, the teller, poopless. He orders Joey to collect the cash from the vault, smacks his face with the gun to speed him up. Two minutes, the robber's out the door with the money and Joey. Missy's on the floor counting to a thousand so she doesn't see the car they go in."

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"And she didn't recognize the robber?"

Jeanie shook her head.

"Here's the part I don't get," Roy said. "Someone robs the bank, gets two hundred thousand, kidnaps Joey. Okay, first, why'd they do that? Whatta they need him for? Hostage? Okay. But then they get rid of Joey, that's what we're all thinking. So why's Joey's brother get himself shot? That's the part don't compute."

Bartels made a show of disinterest, stifling a yawn. "I think I'll go find that motel," he said.

As soon as he checked into the Starlight Motel, getting a room that looked down on the spotty nighttime traffic along the interstate, Bartels phoned Mary Anne and told her he wasn't going to make it for a couple more days. She called him a name, then he told her how much money might be loose in Whist. After that he was her honey again.

He went down to the bar. The only drinkers were from the interstate, and the basketball game on the TV would have put a bookie to sleep. Bartels wasn't too surprised when Roy Hanigan came in and sat next to him.

"I bet you've got some ideas," Roy said. Looking sideways, he said, "I got a few."

"About souls that need saving?"

"I'd say someone's soul is too far gone. Darlin', could you bring me a draft and put it on this guy's tab? My idea is that two hundred big ones are up for grabs."

Bartels didn't answer.

"You noticed I said 'big ones.'"

"I haven't heard that kind of talk from a churchman."

"Jeanie's the one that got ordained, not me. But I been in the sin business a long time. Sometimes one side, sometimes the other. Thing that interests me here is if the money's still in Whist, it ain't got a lot of legal protection. Figure you been thinking the same. We could be competitors, or we could help each other."

Bartels pretended to consider. He noticed that the scars under Roy's beard might have been made by a knife carving X's. So Roy might have gotten on the wrong side of a prison gang—not a sign he was smart.

"I think you've got me wrong, Mr. Hanigan."

"I seen how you stayed polite to Deputy Howard. The deputies jacked you up, but you never got angry. Where'd you do your time?"

Bartels shook his head. "I'm an antiques dealer. Tomorrow morning I'm driving on. Bank robbery is none of my concern."

Roy's mouth dropped its friendly curl. "Bull. I've been around enough to know what I'm lookin' at. You're gonna go for the money. Your problem is, you don't know where to begin. I do."

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Bartels smiled and lifted the glass that contained his cordial. "Then I wish you luck, Mr. Hanigan."

The big man swung off the chair and left the bar, and Bartels laid a twenty beside his glass and followed. He got to the parking lot in time to see the big-finned convertible slide onto the highway and, not ten seconds later, a beige van detach itself from the darkness and follow.

Bartels took his time pulling a jacket from the trunk of his car. The trunk was cluttered with the kind of magazines and packaging material an antiques dealer would carry, and he had to grope under the stuff to pull the Beretta .380 from its holster. He checked the magazine, slipped the gun into his jacket. Well, like he tried to tell Mary Anne, you had to keep looking to find stuff.

He drove into Whist, wipers snicking, and looked for tail fins.

The mini-mart was deserted except for crime scene tape, but someone had decided to keep the Wig-Wam restaurant open long past seven. Two sheriff's cars were pulled off the road beside the restaurant. He drove past, turned around a mile down the road, and came back. His biggest problem was not knowing where Jeanie and Roy Hanigan lived. That and not knowing who was in the beige van following Hanigan—though he had a guess on that one. He stopped at the Wig-Wam and went inside.

Deputy Howard Cross had returned to a table. Alderman Fogel was there, along with a man and a woman Bartels didn't recognize. The woman was big and gray blonde and mean eyed, not hard to figure who she was unless there were two Imogenes in town. The man, who looked to be in his seventies with a shrunken lower jaw, wore a cook's apron.

"Couldn't stay away, Mr. Bartels?" Fogel said. "Whist has that effect on people."

"One of your neighbors paid me a visit," Bartels said. "He suggested we team up to find the bank's money."

"That would be real civic minded if you meant to give it back," Fogel said. "But I guess if Roy Hanigan paid the visit, he hasn't got that in mind. Have you met Imogene Cross and her daddy?"

The woman was a bigger version of the gal who had tried to get her claws into him at the mini-mart. Bartels wasn't a small man, but he thought if someone like that came at you, all you could do was run or shoot her. Both of her big hands had skinned knuckles. Bartels glanced at Howard Cross but didn't see any bruises. Maybe she worked her father over.

"Imogene owns this establishment, and her daddy cooks," Fogel explained.

The old man had been waiting tables earlier. He held out a bony hand toward Bartels. "Bob Everly. So you buy antiques. See any besides me?"

"The Shaker hutch looks well cared for."

"It was my grandma's," Everly said.

The younger deputy, Lou, came out of the back while they were talking.

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He carried his hat on one finger. His black crewcut was cut so close it looked like sprinkled coal dust.

"Look who came back," he said.

"Roy Hanigan tried to enlist Mr. Bartels in a treasure hunt," Alderman Fogel said. He glanced at Bartels. "It was Roy, wasn't it? You don't need to say. We know our neighbors around here. Lou, are you goin' back on duty?"

"Thought I would, in case someone wants to jump out and surrender. You wanna come, Howard?"

The older deputy got up reluctantly, set his hat on his head, told Imogene, "See ya later, honey."

Bartels watched through the front window. The deputies took separate cruisers. Snow was drifting down gently, as though it had all night. After a couple of minutes, Bartels used the snow as an excuse to head back to the motel. The tracks the deputies' cars had left remained clear as he drove through the village, down the twisting road past the Hanigans' radio station. He swung off the pavement and checked the back of the station, but neither Hanigan vehicle was there. He fell in behind the deputies again.

Five miles out of town, the cruisers cut into a side road and Bartels switched off his headlights. There were stationary taillights not far down the side road. He left his car. Trees grew to the edge of the lane. He followed them. The deputies' cars were just ahead, headlights slanting down a hillside to an old house trailer perched on blocks. The beige van that had followed Roy Hanigan had gone down a rutted path to the trailer.

The deputies sidestepped down and hammered on the trailer door, and Katie Robbins opened it. She let them inside.

Bartels stayed on the slope, looked through a window. The naked man tied to a chrome and vinyl chair looked a lot like Henry Robbins, wrinkled face, mean mouth. With Henry dead, he had to be the brother. Joey the bank manager. There was a table next to him with a lighted cigar on a plate. The big blond woman held a belt strap so the buckle dangled. The man had wounds and burns on his arms and chest.

The deputies stood with fists on hips, talking to Katie. Lou reached out and slapped the banker's face.

Bartels didn't need to hear the conversation. Three people in the trailer wanted to know where two hundred thousand dollars had gone. One person knew and wasn't saying. Bartels snuck back to the road, saw the big-finned convertible parked fifty feet beyond his own car. Leaning against a fender, Roy Hanigan waved to him.

"Katie thought she was tailing me," Hanigan said. "The sisters own the trailer. Imogene owns the van. I didn't figure Howard and Lou was in on it."

"You been down there?"

"Yeah."

"Is that the banker?"

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"That's Joey. Got me a theory. Henry was the robber. He and Joey put the money somewhere safe. Those Everly sisters figure it's rightly theirs. I figure Katie got impatient today and did Henry. Or maybe it was Imogene. One of 'em."

Bartels didn't argue.

"We better get outta here. If you changed your mind about going partners, you can follow me home. Jeanie makes good coffee."

Bartels followed him home.

The couple had a drafty house on the north side of the village. Jeanie put on coffee and sat at a painted oak table as her husband talked. She said she was disappointed in Lou, who had always been a good churchgoer. "Howard and Imogene only come to play the guitar and sing, like they think a Hollywood agent's listening to our station. But that's bad, if Lou's thrown in with them."

"It's not bad if you and Roy stay out of it," Bartels pointed out.

She squinted. "Why should those sinners end up rich?"

"The problem," her husband said, "if we find the money, Lou and Howard are gonna take it off us. Or maybe Katie and Imogene will. Either way, there's four of them. So we gotta work something out."

Bartels lowered his coffee mug. "You're not going to have any listeners left."

"With two hundred big ones, I'm gonna be sitting on a beach. Me and Jeanie."

"Nice you're including me." His wife watched him.

"What about the girls' father?" Bartels asked.

"Bob Everly won't be a problem. Imogene and Katie got their mean from their mother. They gotta go for sure, plus Lou and Howard. That's fifty thousand each for doin' four people I don't like much. Assumin' we come out on top."

Jeanie rested her elbows on the table. "Your math's off, sweetie. We'll get twenty-five each. Mr. Bartels will want his cut."

The big man turned on Bartels. "That's if we're partners."

Staying a step ahead of this pair wouldn't be too hard. Bartels said, "You got any ideas?"

"We let them do the heavy lifting. When they got the money, we take it off them."

"Why not take Joey?"

"We'd have to get him to talk. Tell you the truth, I'm squeamish about that stuff. Katie don't seem to be."

Bartels slept on their couch and was awakened before midnight when the phone rang. Roy Hanigan listened, then pulled on his jeans and heavy boots. "There's a fire, and I'm a volunteer. What a night for it! You keep your hands off my lady, Bartels."

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"I'll make some coffee and come after you," Jeanie said.
"It's County Road 9. Betcha I know where."

Alderman Ken Fogel peeked out from under his cap and said, "I'm surprised to see you tonight, Mr. Bartels."
"Saw the flames from the motel. Thought I'd come have a look."
"Better'n porn TV?"
"Different."
The rural fire protection unit had only a single pumper truck, which was sitting on the side road above the burned-out trailer. One ice-coated hose snaked down to the scene, which was mostly smoke and knee-high ruins. Deputy Howard Cross had already run up the hill with the bad news that it looked like the trailer contained a body. He was in his cruiser, radioing the state medical examiner's office. Deputy Lou was midway down the hill.
"You think it's one of the girls?" Fogel asked.
Lou shook his head. "We checked. Katie's home. Imogene's at the restaurant. Maybe some hobo snuck in, lit the heater."
Bartels watched a fireman below, chopping the trailer floor for a hot spot. "Why not your missing banker?"
Lou pretended to consider. "Makes sense. More likely Joey than a hobo. Whoever grabbed him maybe knew the trailer was empty."
"Think the money burned up with him?"
"Could be, if that's Joey. We'll go through the ruins."
Bartels nodded. "You ever consider the possibility that Joey Robbins arranged the holdup?"
The deputy looked up at Fogel, who grinned at Bartels. "You got a sneaky way with you. He could've. It's occurred to some of us. Since we know Joey like he's family, we don't put it in words too often."
"Pretend you don't know him."
"You could give a lot of weight to one thing. Say Joey heard rumors that after the bank consolidation, he wouldn't stay manager. Might make a fellow bitter."
"Understandable."
"Here's what's wrong with it. If Joey took the money himself, why's he been hiding out here five days? Assuming that's Joey down there. He coulda been long gone."
"Maybe somebody hijacked him?"
"Oh, man," said Lou.
Jeanie Hanigan was over by the cruisers pouring coffee. Her husband was down near the trailer, aiming a water stream at a tree that had partly burned. Fighting down a grin, Bartels stomped through the snow back to his car. He got in and drove back to their house. When the Hanigans arrived, Roy shucked his coat into the same closet from which he pulled a pump-action shotgun.

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"You heard the new official version?" he asked. "Joey and the two hundred K both went up in smoke."

"Heard it? I invented it, and Lou jumped on it."

"So it's finders keepers. Unless someone takes what you find away from you. You think Lou's got it?"

"At least one of them has," Bartels said. "I can't figure which one."

"Howard and Lou couldn't have stayed there all night," Jeanie pointed out. "They were supposed to be patrolling. Katie had time. If she believed what Joey told her, I could see her torching her own trailer with him in it."

Roy thumbed shells into the gun. "So we pay Katie a visit." He told his wife, "Stay here. Anyone comes looking for us, shoot 'em."

Bartels climbed into the big-finned convertible's passenger side. Roy propped the shotgun between them. They drove down into the village, cruised the main road looking for Imogene's beige van. The family house was dark, and the parking pad at the Wig-Wam was empty except for an inch and a half of snow.

"Let's check out the mini-mart," Roy said.

They drove back to the mini-mart and gas station, which was locked and dark. Theirs were the only tire tracks crossing the lot. Bartels got out and looked into the repair bay. Snow was starting to pile up against the door, but he looked anyway. The interior was empty.

He got back in the car. "Where next?"

"We'll try Howard's place."

Roy drove back the way they had come, past the tilting frame houses, up along a ridge that had a few big trucks parked on one side, then past a low institutional building that looked like a regional school, and a mile or so later—where Bartels could guess at the snowy road only because there were mailboxes and utility poles—Roy Hanigan started steering with one hand and pointing past Bartels. "It used to be their parents' place, but then Imogene threw Bob Everly out, made him live behind the restaurant, so Imogene and Howard live there now. See the lights? And there's the van."

Roy doused the headlights, cut the engine, and drifted to a stop. "Let's pay our respects to the widow. Maybe you should go up to the door first, Mr. Bartels."

"Why me?"

"I want to know if they're jumpy enough to shoot."

"Let's assume they are. You got the shotgun, you lead."

Roy stepped past him and Bartels slammed his pistol into the back of the man's head. Roy went to his knees, and Bartels hit him again. Roy sprawled in the snow. Bartels picked up the shotgun, patted the man's bulky jacket and pants, and found a revolver that he stuffed into his pocket.

He took a roundabout route to the house, but his first guess was right:

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There was no easy way inside unless someone opened a door, which he didn't think was likely. So he hunkered down beside the front porch and waited.

A sheriff's cruiser arrived twenty minutes later. Lou hit the brakes hard when he saw the big fins parked in the road and jumped out. Roy Hanigan was lightly dusted with snow but still visible as a human lump. Lou ran to the porch, shouting, and the door opened before he got there. A big woman in a heavy wool jacket stared in alarm in the direction the deputy was pointing.

"It's Roy's car," Lou gobbled. "And it's Roy in the snow. Did you shoot him?"

"I ain't shot no one. Neither's Katie, not tonight. We better look around for Jeanie."

"Or that out-a-towner," Lou said. He was catching his breath, starting to think. "Did Joey say where the money was?"

"Yeah. Dummy had it in the ceiling at the bank. Katie and I got it. We been counting ever since."

"How much you count?"

"Two hundred five, plus a little. Wouldn't of guessed Joey had it in him. Lotta money."

"Not enough," Lou said and shot her. Imogene Cross pitched through the doorway and Lou followed, catching Katie at the table with her hand six inches from the big revolver she had used on her husband. "Howard and I agreed we couldn't trust you gals," he said and fired again.

Bartels, who had come onto the porch right behind him, pressed the shotgun against the center of the deputy's back.

When Howard Cross arrived a few minutes later, he walked into the house and found Lou sitting in a straight-backed chair with a stack of money in front of him. He noticed the women on the floor. "Any trouble?" he asked.

From behind the door, Bartels answered. "Not much."

He got them both handcuffed, took the loose guns out to the car, then pulled Roy Hanigan out of the snow. The big man had trouble walking but no trouble cursing Bartels. "Knew I couldn't trust you." When he saw the pile of money, he said, "You gonna shoot everyone and keep it all?"

"I wish," Bartels said. The antiques shop was slipping, so he had to moonlight. Insurance companies paid fifteen percent of what he recovered. He did the math for the big guy. Thirty thousand.

"We helped. You oughta cut me and Jeanie in," Hanigan protested.

"How much do you want?"

"Half."

"When I found the money, you were asleep in the snow."

"A quarter. I drove." His eyes shifted to the two deputies. "It's getting so

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it ain't much money for any of us. If we could figure what to do with Howard and Lou, we'd do better. Just a thought."

"How much would you want?"

"A quarter?"

"But we'd have to kill them."

Roy reminded him, "I never liked 'em much."

Bartels spent the rest of the night at the motel, gun on the pillow. When Roy and Jeanie Hanigan started thinking about it, they might decide the other three-quarters was worth paying him a visit.

THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER

by Willie Rose

Each letter consistently represents another. The quotation is from a short mystery story. Arranging the answer letters in alphabetical order gives a clue to the title of the story.

TN'I CKKNLMNI C ZVI FEAN SFK LTFFMVEW FOM NPNKU LMKNNMBVWTM FE C HBFAZ, CEI QTNE TN'I CLZNI TVD QTU TN IVI VM MTN CELQNK ACDN, "HNACOLN V BVZN VM ICKZ."

—L. Q. TOHHCKI

CIPHER: _

ANSWER: A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

Solution on page 108

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DYING WORDS

ACROSTIC BY ARLENE FISHER

For instructions on how to solve the acrostic puzzle, turn to page 91.
The solution to the puzzle will appear in the April issue.

DEFINITIONS	WORDS
A. Rash, e.g.	45 99 80 29 1 121 146 93
B. Hint, say	68 26 169 104 142 50 3 36
C. 1905 introduction	86 115 4 145 16 28 166
D. Quarantine symbol: 2 wds.	160 89 6 152 131 113 101 149 95 108
E. Hopper work	77 130 53 40 12 2 153 9 69 65
F. Facile	61 24 116 90
G. Had a brown study	137 55 62 106 139 67 96 48 163
H. Pistachio kin	129 19 168 60 35 102
I. Immigration, nowadays: 2 wds.	73 126 71 82 141 34 92 112 155
J. Trattoria offering	123 128 17 156 88 143 8 100
K. Jurisdiction	111 147 120 13 162 83 41 56 76
L. Like cheesecloth	98 58 103 44 5 133
M. — name	158 117 25 114 78 127
N. Spears song that starts "I'm ferocious"	74 154 119 38 135 159 54 94 150
O. Fencing maneuver	59 110 27 138 42 105

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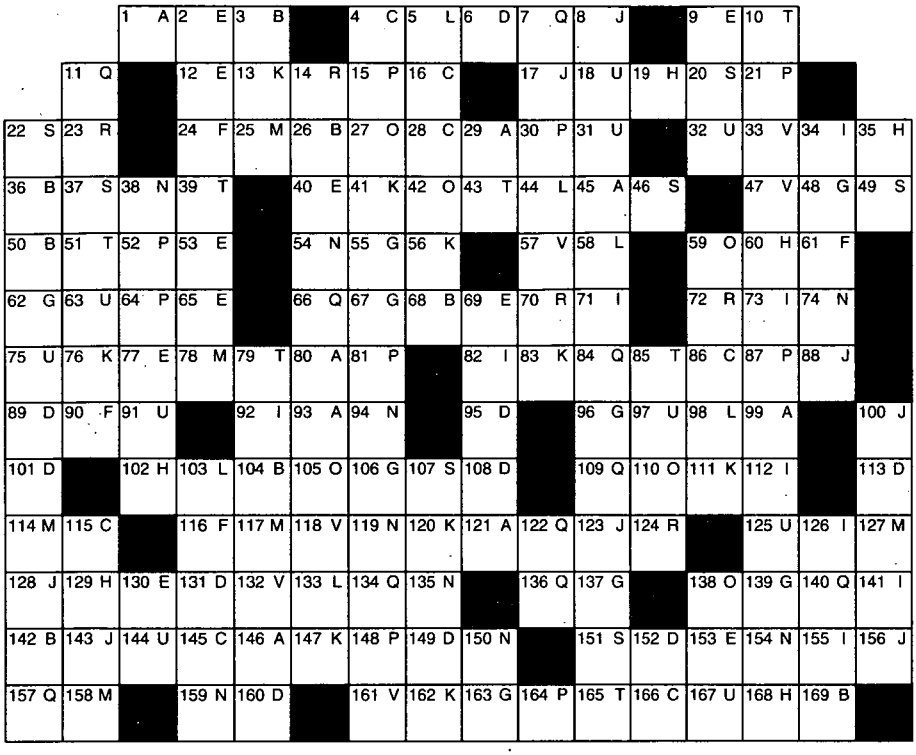

P. Sine qua non — 164 64 148 21 52 87 15 30 81

Q. Toady's trademark — 140 136 122 7 134 84 66 157 11 109

R. It may be past — 72 70 23 124 14

S. Childhood preceder — 22 49 151 37 107 20 46

T. What Nike personifies — 85 51 79 43 10 165 39

U. Vatican release — 91 31 125 97 144 32 167 75 63 18

V. High-level confab — 47 132 118 161 33 57

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PAST IMPERFECT

JIM INGRAHAM

That warm morning on the coast of Maine I parked my Jeep and walked on hard clay through a salt marsh to the stone steps of Elric Hoagy's cottage. I hadn't been here in a while and stood on the porch enjoying the briny wind coming in off Casco Bay, the cries of seagulls, the glints of sunlight on the swaying acres of grass, the fragrance of the marsh.

Elric was asleep in his old Morris chair by a fireplace, a white-haired man in his seventies wearing corduroy pants, bare feet resting on a pillow. Frenchie, his hound, was on a rug at his feet, jaw on his paws, watching me with mild interest. The wind stirred gauze curtains at an open window across the room.

I rapped on a post at the staircase. Elric didn't budge. Frenchie thudded his tail, got up and came over to smell my hand, get his head scruffed, then went back to the rug.

"Leave your door unlocked like that," I said, "someone's gonna come in and steal you."

Elric smiled before he opened his eyes. "Ain't seen you in a while."

I moved newspaper off a chair and sat down facing him. "Looking for Eloise," I said.

He yawned, found an itch under a layer of shirt, and scratched it. "She's out on the rocks, painting. Want something to drink?"

"Just ate," I said.

"Don't mean you can't drink, Duff."

He hitched himself up in the chair, glanced past me. "Sure that door was unlocked? Thought I locked it."

"Wasn't locked."

"Thought I locked it," he said, getting up.

He kicked his leg a few times, curing a cramp I supposed, then paused in the kitchen doorway. "You gonna sit a while? Or you just come to see her?"

"Can't stay," I said.

"Well, she's out there," and he left the room, not in the least offended.

I walked down a clay path to the end of the marsh, stepped through yellow patches of grass onto gray ledge, and watched a boy just offshore

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standing on the stern sheets of Elric's renovated Jonesport dumping bait from a firkin, noisy seagulls fluttering over him. Like me twenty years ago, a high school kid earning summer pay hauling traps. I noticed Elric's dory propped under hanging buoys against his fishing shack. The tide was out and a heavy odor was coming in off the mudflats.

Elric's daughter Eloise was hunched forward on her stool, her back to me, easel in front. She was studying lobster buoys in the choppy water beyond rocks draped with seaweed. Across the inlet were the bleached barnacle-coated pilings of an abandoned wharf on an empty stretch of sand.

"You've done this scene before," I said. "Saw it at your last showing."

She turned, started. "Hey!" she said, reaching out a warm hand. About my age, she was a broad-shouldered Scandinavian woman, with a wind-coarsened face, blue eyes, and blond eyebrows. A sailor's knit cap held her hair down.

She dropped a brush into a coffee can, swished it back and forth, wiped it on a stained kitchen towel. "Still trying to capture it," she said, sitting back, taking a breather. "So what brings you down here?"

I found a boulder to sit on, glanced for a moment at the open sea, and caught a whiff of turpentine before the wind blew it off. Raising my voice over the sound of waves crashing the rocks, I said, "Was your friend Nora Murphy ever a friend of a guy named Dixie Hardaway?"

"Wow! That's a name out of the past."

"You and Nora still friends?"

"Sure, but I never knew Dixie Hardaway, only what Nora told me—some rich man's son she fell in love with. What's going on?"

"What can you tell me about Nora?"

"A high school teacher. Lives with her mother. Why are you asking?"

A sudden gust tilted her easel. She made a grab for it, almost falling off her stool. I helped her wedge its legs into a cleft in the rocks.

"The summer my father was killed, would you remember if the police questioned her?"

"Ahh . . ." Her eyes brightened. "You're still doing that. No, never heard that they did. Why would they?"

"You remember, don't you, that Nora was shacked up with Dixie Hardaway that summer?"

She laughed. "Where'd you get that expression? People don't say 'shacked up' anymore. 'Shacked up' makes it sound dirty. It wasn't dirty. They were in love. At least, she was."

We stared at each other a few seconds. A little smile was in her eyes, waiting for the next question.

"Ran into a lawyer yesterday in Steep Falls," I said, "an old friend of my father's. He said he'd rented a cottage down Cape Porpoise next to one rented by Dixie Hardaway and a woman named Nora Murphy. Thought it might be your friend."

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"It was. Yeah, that was a big summer for Nora. In love for the first time. I never saw her happier. But it all came crashing down, poor woman."

"How?"

"Well, for openers, her mother lost a leg to diabetes, then was paralyzed by a stroke. Nora had to take a year off from teaching. With all due respect to you, Duff, I doubt she paid much attention to news about a murder."

"What was never in the news," I said, "is that Dixie was one of several people questioned by the police. He was a suspected drug user. What bothered this lawyer and now bothers me is that Dixie claimed he'd gone to Florida the weekend my father was killed. The lawyer thinks he lied."

"That summer—what was it, eight years ago?—if Nora had missed a weekend with that man, she'd've come sobbing to me. And she never did."

"You sure?"

"She lived for those weekends. She was in love."

"This guy said she was on a blanket with Dixie every Friday, Saturday, and Sunday right in front of his place. Drove his wife nuts with his children out there giggling at them."

"So why's this important now?"

"Because he lied. He didn't deny being with a woman. It wasn't to protect her. He just told them he went to Florida that very weekend. Why would he say that if he wasn't hiding something?"

"You might find out from Nora. But she might not want to talk about it. That summer's a bitter memory for her."

"You have her address?"

I found Nora's mother in the small backyard of a two-story house that had to be, like most houses on Munjoy Hill, at least a hundred years old. Paint blisters on the clapboards, red begonias in faded green boxes under street-level windows. She was in a wheelchair with only one foot protruding from a quilted robe that covered her legs. I guessed she was in her seventies. She looked like a spent old lady with sallow cheeks and thinning gray hair and sagging jowls. She looked up from a magazine as I walked toward her. I watched her lift a Perrier bottle off the grass and drink from it while squinting at me over metal-rimmed reading glasses.

"Mrs. Murphy?"

"Why, yes, young man," she said, her face brightening. I guessed she didn't get many visitors.

"I'm Duff Kerrigan." I handed her my National Assurance card. (I don't carry one identifying me as a private investigator—too intimidating.)

She put the bottle down and pushed her glasses higher on her nose and read every word on the card. She seemed disappointed to find nothing printed on the back.

"My husband sold insurance," she said, handing the card back. "Everything on the hill this side of Congress Street was what he called his

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debit, all the way down past Longfellow's house. Everybody on the hill knew him and loved him."

I found out later that her husband had been dead for more than ten years.

"Nora should be home anytime now. She probably stopped to get some groceries. I told her we were low on coffee." Looking across the table at a chair laden with potting soil, plant pots, and a bag of fertilizer, she said, "You can bring a chair out from the kitchen if you'd like. Nora sometimes does that although she's not one for sitting around much. She likes to putter in the garden or stay in her room. She has a computer up there. I think she's writing a book, although I don't know what she has to write about. She doesn't have any social life. She's always been fearful of boys. . . ."

I heard a car stop at the curb behind my Jeep and went out to see a slender woman, maybe five four, set a stack of papers on the hood of her car. She opened the trunk and lifted out a bag of groceries.

"Can I help you with that?" I said, crossing the street.

A puzzled "What?" came to her face.

"You're Nora Murphy?" giving her a big smile. "I'm Duff Kerrigan."

That got a so-what look as she lowered the lid of the trunk and gathered the papers off the hood.

A few papers slid from her hand to the pavement. I helped pick them up. They were pages with ragged edges torn out of spiral notebooks, student essays.

As she took them from me, she said, "You want to see me?"

"I'm a friend of Eloise Hoagy," I said.

That brought another so-what look, but one that was tinged with curiosity.

I followed her up steps to the lawn, watching her pink heels slide in and out of black flat shoes under the low hem of a dark blue dress. She said something to her mother and went to the back door. "I'll be right out," as though telling me to stay put.

While waiting, I learned a lot about Mrs. Murphy's husband the insurance salesman and about the four-masted schooners that were still coming into the harbor when Mrs. Murphy was a child, "long past their most useful time, of course. They took the masts down and used the hulls to carry pulpwood down from the rivers. This was once a very important seaport." She glanced at the back door when Nora came out. "Sometimes at night I watched my husband standing at the window. I always thought he was dreaming about going to sea." She started to laugh. "Maybe to get away from me. He always said I talked too much."

"How can I help you?" Nora said, coming onto the grass, brushing a lock of hair off her forehead. She was every high school English teacher you ever knew, strong willed and forthright. Maybe she had little social life, but she was not mousy. Her face glowed with the radiance of a disciplined mind.

"Are you a lawyer?"

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"A private investigator."

Her expression grew thoughtful. "And this is about Eloise?"

"I guess the two of you are friends."

She glanced at her mother, probably to determine whether she was listening, then led me down the walk toward the street. She was suspicious and annoyed but curious.

"Actually it's about Dixie Hardaway."

That jolted her. "So just what is it you want?" she said in a manner that told me I wouldn't get it, whatever it was.

To protect Nora's privacy I turned my back on the old woman in the wheelchair and said, "Eight years ago my father was murdered on a beach down Brackett Shores. He was a policeman watching a cottage where people purchased drugs."

That brought a concerned, puzzled look.

"You spent your weekends that summer in Cape Porpoise with Dixie Hardaway."

She didn't deny it, but the observation made her impatient. "What is it you want?"

"I want to know whether he was with you every weekend?"

Again the puzzled expression. "I don't understand. What is it you're . . . ?"

"You were taking courses at Southern Maine. Every Friday, Saturday, and Sunday you were in Cape Porpoise with Dixie."

"Eloise told you that?"

"She said if he hadn't been at the cottage any one of those weekends, you'd've been upset."

"And what is it you want me to say?"

"I just want to know whether the police questioned you."

"Why would they?" shaking her head as though the question didn't make sense.

"They questioned Dixie. He didn't tell you that?" She didn't answer, didn't intend to answer, still trying to figure out what I wanted. "This is very important to me," I said. "I'm trying to find out who killed my father."

"You think Dixie did?"

"I didn't say that. But he apparently lied to the police about where he was that weekend, and I want to know why."

After a moment's reflection, she said, "I'm sorry. I don't know what he said to the police. I didn't know he talked to the police or had reason to." She started to walk away.

"Please!"

She waved me off with deprecation. That offended me.

"Talk to me or talk to a grand jury," I said.

She took about four steps, turned, and came back. In a tone intended to bring all of this to a close, she said, "I knew nothing about a murder. The police had no reason to question me. Dixie never told me the police had questioned him."

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"Was he with you every weekend?"

About ten seconds floated past her eyes. She resented me and resented my question. But she said, "Yes," and turned and walked away.

That brief answer gave me incentive to book a flight to Fort Myers, Florida, where I spent a day and a half in a rented Ford before I located Dixie at a bar in an outdoor bistro on Sanibel Island.

The sweet smell of decaying algae floated in off the Gulf of Mexico and mingled with odors of cigarettes and whiskey in the humid Florida atmosphere. Seven stools down from me, facing a mirrored wall of bottles, a man who resembled the man in the photo the police had given me removed pictures from his wallet and showed them to the woman on the next stool who regarded them with indifference. For ten minutes he had been hitting on her, unmindful of the amused skepticism that should have told him he was wasting his time.

While I glanced at four pelicans flying languidly down the channel toward the yacht basin, the man I suspected was Dixie Hardaway had pocketed his wallet and was moving down the bar in search, probably, of more receptive prey. I watched him tap a woman on the shoulder, watched her look up at him, smile, and turn toward him. I watched him raise a hand and snap a finger at the barkeep, ordering a drink.

I slid a leg over the stool he had just vacated and looked past the woman's face at the sun dropping slowly into the sea on the western horizon.

"Name's Kerrigan," I said. "Duff Kerrigan. Can I refill your drink?"

"You're wasting your time, honey. I'm waiting for someone."

I smiled and watched painted fingers stroke the stem of her glass.

"I'm not hitting on you. I just want to know about the guy who was just sitting here. Do you know who he is?"

"I believe his name is Benedict Hardaway. Are you gay?"

I laughed. "Is he?"

She shrugged, caressing her glass. "I think he may have a Don Juan complex, trying to prove he's straight with every woman in sight." She pushed her glass toward the barkeep, tapping the rim with a long finger. I saw more years in her eyes than on the smooth flesh of her face.

"He was showing you pictures."

"Of his son. At least that's who he said it was."

"He's married?"

"I wouldn't be surprised. A lot of these barstool johnnies . . ."

"Forgive me," I said, watching Dixie heading down the planks toward a men's room. "Nice talking to you." I hurried after him.

I found him bent over a porcelain sink, a slight, good-looking guy in his early thirties, with dark hair and dark eyes. I waited until he poked his hands under a blower. I saw no wedding ring.

"Dixie Hardaway?"

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He gave me a questioning look, a half smile. "We know each other?"

"Name's Kerrigan," I said.

He laughed. "And I suppose you want a deal on a Cadillac. New or pre-owned?"

"You sell cars?"

People say there's something intimidating about me—maybe my size, maybe something lingering from when I was a cop. I have no idea. But the smile left his face. Later I learned that he owned a Cadillac dealership. Maybe he thought I should have known.

He started to walk past me.

"Nora Murphy," I said.

His face froze. He stopped, turned, started to say something.

"Let's go somewhere and talk," I said.

He didn't want to go anywhere. For several long seconds he stared at me with stubborn resolve.

"It's important," I said. "It's about a man on a beach with five bullet holes in his back."

On what might have been weakening legs, he walked with me down the planks of the pier and leaned on the rail. Pole lamps shed little light on us, but I could see a small tic twitching at the edge of his eye. With a trembling hand he offered me a cigarette. I watched him light one and drag smoke into his face.

"A name I haven't heard in a while," he said, fumbling with his lighter. "Something happened to her?"

"No, and she doesn't know I'm here." I would have handed him my card, but in the dim light he wouldn't've been able to read it.

"Is this about my son?"

That hit hard: I had mentioned Nora Murphy and he asked about his son. My thoughts flew to the rocks at the salt marsh and Eloise telling me that Nora had taken a year off from work. Maybe not only to care for an invalid mother.

"It's about the summer you spent at Cape Porpoise."

"What about it?"

"You were on a list of people who patronized a candy store on Brackett Shores."

He angrily stepped back. "Is this some kind of shakedown?"

"No, and I'm not a cop. I just want to know why you told the police you were in Florida the weekend my father was murdered. You weren't in Florida. You were in Cape Porpoise with Nora. Why did you lie?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

I caught his arm as he started to move away. "You know exactly what I'm talking about." He yanked his arm free. "Talk to me or talk to a grand jury," I called as he walked away.

He stopped. In a nervous voice he said, "I was here with my father that weekend," breathing rapidly. He put his hand to his chest, maybe to quell

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a rapid heartbeat. "The police have my statement. If you try to damage my reputation—"

"You weren't here. You were with Nora."

"My father—"

"If he said you were here, he lied for you. This is the murder of a policeman. It's not going away. You'll get dragged back to Maine. Your father will be questioned."

"What is it you want? Money? You want money?"

"Is Nora the mother of your son?"

"What the hell do you care!"

"Why did you tell the police you were here? Where were you that Saturday night?"

"I don't have to talk to you," he said.

A man, maybe a security cop, was sauntering toward us from the bar, alerted maybe by our shouting. Dixie saw him, strode down the planks, and talked to him. Both men regarded me for a moment, then walked off together.

I decided not to hang around. I caught a night's sleep at a Hampton Inn and spent the following morning riding around in an Escalade SUV with a salesman, learning, among other things, that Dixie had a seven-year-old son enrolled in a local private school and that his father, who had bought him the dealership, was a wealthy supporter of an Evangelical Christian organization dedicated to the abolition of substance abuse.

Back in Maine, after a bumpy overnight flight above the rainstorms, I visited my friend Lieutenant Myron Kadish at the local police station and told him what I had learned. I didn't mention Nora or Dixie's son. For now, at least, Nora's name didn't have to go into the record.

"It's not enough," Mike said, leaning back in his swivel chair, fingers entwined at the back of his head, sweat patches in his armpits, children's watercolors on the bulletin board behind him. "But let's get Porky up here."

Porky Johnson was the investigator assigned to my father's case. We didn't like each other. At least a dozen times over the last eight years he had threatened me with arrest for interfering in his investigation. Each time Mike had rescued me with a mild rebuke.

"It's my father, Mike."

"It's his case. It's police business. For the tenth time, stay out of it."

"But he's not doing anything!"

Annoyance flashed in Porky's eyes when he saw me as he swaggered into the office. He didn't greet me; I didn't greet him. He dropped onto a hard chair against the wall and leaned back, legs stretched out, looking

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like a kid with a bad attitude who'd been called into the principal's office.

"We got something," Mike said, fingering the file his secretary had just dropped onto his desk.

Porky waited.

"This guy—" He flipped through some pages, ran his finger down a sheet. "—Benedict Hardaway you interviewed. You remember him?"

"Supposed to be a customer of the hag who ran that place. We had nothing on him. He alibied out."

"But you remember him."

Porky shrugged.

"His father, it says—"

"I remember him because his father's lawyer called, accused me of threatening the kid."

"And he said the kid was in Florida?"

With typical arrogance, Porky didn't bother to answer. It was on the record.

"Did you even follow up on that? Why would the guy call in his lawyer?"

"We had no evidence his son was anywhere near that cottage the night of the homicide," Porky said wearily, as though talking to an idiot. "We didn't have anything—"

"We've found a witness who says Dixie Hardaway was with a woman that weekend in Cape Porpoise."

"What witness?"

"A lawyer Duff ran into, said he rented a cottage next to Hardaway's and saw him there with a woman every weekend, including the weekend Duff's father was killed."

"Give me the name," Porky said, sitting up, pulling a notebook out of his inside jacket pocket. "I'll check it out." He looked at me. "Got a name for the woman?"

They were both watching me. I didn't want to surrender Nora's name. A child and a woman's reputation were at risk. But it would catch up with me if I lied.

"Nora Murphy," I said.

"I'll check it out." He stood. "Anything else?"

"Yeah," Mike said, showing him the picture of Dixie Hardaway I had been given a copy of. "If this guy wasn't important to your investigation, why's his picture in here?"

That brought concern. "I don't know. I didn't put it there."

He didn't ask to see it. His eyes challenged Mike to call him a liar. Porky was too smart to show contempt, but it was there behind the eyes. We watched him leave the office.

"I don't like that son of a bitch," I said.

Mike laughed. "Nobody does."

"But you know how that picture got into the file?"

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The question amused him. "Just wanted to get his reaction," he said, which might have been the truth, but left a bunch of untold truths dangling behind it.

"I'm not unmindful that my father was in Internal Affairs, Mike, and that it would have been out of place for him to be checking on a whorehouse. Is there a separate investigation going on?"

"You know how your father was, especially after your mother died."

"A workaholic, you said."

"Yes, and he was going out on little excursions that had nothing to do with the behavior of policemen, acting like a cop from the old days, comforting himself, killing time. I know you think he wouldn't've been on that beach trying to close that cottage down. Okay, I can understand that. But we have no evidence—not in his notes, not in the record—that he was out there checking on a police officer."

"But he might've been."

"Sure, he might've been. He might've been suspicious as hell of someone, but there's nothing about it in his reports."

He knew I wanted more. I knew there was more and knew I wouldn't get it.

"You admitted once that Porky didn't follow up on a lot of leads—"

"Stay out of it, Duff."

I could have sat there an hour arguing that I had a right to know, but it would only have antagonized Mike. He was already sharing a lot more information with me than I was entitled to. I let it go.

The following afternoon I was in my office putting together information about a house fire I had investigated for an insurance company when Nora Murphy called. She sounded scared. She wanted to talk.

Because I knew she'd be more comfortable at her own place than in a made-into-an-office bedroom in my loft, I said I'd be right over.

I saw Nora's finger holding a lace curtain aside at a front window when I pulled up at the curb behind her Ford. She pointed toward the walk that led to the back door.

"My mother's taking a nap," she said as I entered a kitchen that smelled of old house and fresh coffee. Nora pointed to a chair at a cloth-covered kitchen table.

"Just milk," I said, as she set a teacup and saucer in front of me. "No sugar."

Everything in the room was old and old-fashioned, as though time had floated through the lives of these two women unnoticed. There were stains on the wallpaper, raw wood where varnish had peeled off the frame of a doorway that led past a staircase to a darkened front room.

"I've talked to someone about you," she said, measuring my reaction.

"Okay."

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She rested the rim of the cup against her bottom lip, her thin upper lip retreating from the coffee as she sipped.

"Winona Dyer," she said, across the surface of the coffee.

"A good friend." She was a probation officer I sometimes worked for.

"I don't know her very well," Nora said. "She runs a kind of school for parolees. I teach there once in a while . . . Anyway, she said you were, as she put it, 'good people.'"

Nice to hear.

She took several deep breaths as though fighting off the jitters.

To ease things, I asked, "Why do they call your friend 'Dixie'? He's not a Southerner, is he?"

"It's just a sobriquet for Benedict." She took another sip of coffee, stared at something across the room, tightened her lips. "He called," she said, pain settling into her eyes. "He's very upset."

I threw it right in without warning. "You're the mother of his son."

"Yes," she said, without hesitation, apparently not surprised that I knew. "His father—"

"Eloise told me how that summer ended. She didn't mention a child."

"She was just being delicate."

"Has a police investigator contacted you?"

"No, but a woman from around here called Dixie, and he called me. He thought you might have told her to call."

"No."

She studied my expression. A vulnerability that I hadn't seen before lingered in her eyes. "I just don't know who to trust." Her heart was right out there, unprotected, watching me with the innocent expectation of a frightened mother.

"What did this woman tell him?"

"She told him he'd be in serious trouble if he didn't keep his mouth shut."

"About what?"

"He didn't explain. He assumed I would know. That's why I called you. He knew what the woman meant. How would he know that unless he was involved in something?"

"So he's hiding something. And he warned you about me?"

"He told me not to tell you anything—not about him, not about our son, not anything. I don't know what's going on!" Tears broke into her eyes. "I don't want anything to happen to my son."

After blowing her nose and apologizing for having lost her composure, Nora told me the story of her child. His name, she said, is Avery. He was born five months after her mother suffered her stroke. She was unable to care for him because she had to return to work and look after her mother who had become almost helpless. Dixie's father wanted to adopt the boy. Nora refused to give up her parental rights, but she permitted Dixie to take the boy to Florida.

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"It broke my heart, but I had no choice." For an instant, a search for approval appeared in her eyes, then abruptly vanished. She was riding on a lot of guilt.

We heard her mother cough in the other room. "If she calls I'll have to help her into her chair and make tea. We can go outside."

I went into the yard and found a flat rock to sit on at the steps near the street, wondering whether any moment of Nora's life was free of guilt.

When she came out I asked for the name of the woman who had phoned Dixie. She had written it on a piece of paper.

"She's not in the book," Nora said.

"I'll find her."

A fragrance of cheese hit me when I opened the door of Altieri's Market on Fore Street. A woman behind the counter looked up—late thirties, a bit hefty, not bad looking, streaks of gray in dark hair pulled back to a bun.

"I'm looking for Gina Spalitro."

"And what do you want with her?" she said, looking me over, half testily, half amused.

"Are you Gina?"

A door opened behind her. A bald man in his sixties looked out, eyes on me.

"It's okay, Papa," the woman said.

The man retreated.

I said, "It's about Dixie Hardaway."

The woman's face turned to stone. "Who?" stumbled out of her mouth.

"If you're Gina Spalitro, you made a phone call to him in Florida. You made it from here."

That flustered her. "Oh, yeah," she said. "I called a friend down there, but I don't know any . . . What'd you say his name was?"

"I'm not a cop, Gina."

"I don't care what you are." No hint of friendliness in her now.

"You could be mixed up in a murder investigation."

Fear stirred in her eyes. "What murder? What're you talking about?"

"You told Dixie Hardaway to keep his mouth shut."

"I don't know what you're talking about. Get out of here," flailing both hands, waving me toward the door.

"This isn't going away."

"You are! Get the hell out of here!" She reached under the counter, maybe for a gun. I didn't wait to find out. If she had a gun, she was tough enough to use it.

I took all of this straight to Mike. He was off duty, just up from the weight room in a sweatshirt and old police pants. I persuaded him to stop at Amato's and split an Italian sandwich with me. We enjoyed it with cold beers in my Jeep in the parking lot. I told him about Nora's latest call.

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"That's what makes it interesting," I said. "When Porky got to the high school, he waited in the corridor outside her classroom. Hadn't called, hadn't made an appointment, but he knew she had the next hour off."

"And he didn't ask her anything about Cape Porpoise or that weekend?"

"Or whether Dixie had gone to Florida. He didn't seem to care about that. All he wanted to know was whether Dixie had any 'bad habits,' is how he said it."

"Didn't mention drugs?"

"No. And didn't ask about Dixie's alibi. He just wanted to know what kind of person Dixie was. And I guess the main reason she called me—he wanted to know whether she'd ever been to Brackett Shores."

"And how do you read that?"

"For one thing, I never mentioned Brackett Shores to her, but nothing she said made me think she knew the significance of Porky's question. I think it troubled her because it was off the mark. She's a pretty bright woman. If nothing more, his questions told her that Dixie was mixed up in something. It's the welfare of her son she's worried about. She wants this cleared up. She offered to hire me—"

Mike lowered his bottle. "No. Stay out of it. You're involved too much as it is." He took a bite of sandwich, sipped from the bottle, staring thoughtfully at me. "You remember the woman who ran that house?"

"Calysta Frye."

"At her trial she never gave up the names of any of her customers. I can't question her. After what she went through, she'd call it harassment. A civilian, on the other hand . . . Oh, and by the way, Gina Spalitro was one of Calysta's girls. She was a witness against Calysta at her trial."

"Calysta's out of prison?"

"Bought a bed and breakfast on Sebago Lake in Raymond."

"It have a name?"

"Lakeside B & B. It's right on 302."

As I was getting up to leave, he said, "Remember, nothing about your father's case was allowed at her trial. She was tried strictly as a madam. We didn't have enough to try her for selling drugs. Nobody admitted anything."

"And nobody heard the shots . . . yeah, I know."

"That could be legit. It was a windy night. Waves crashing, all that. Maybe you can get something out of her. Don't bother with the drug stuff, it's statuted out."

I had a lot to think about as I drove up country roads to a lake that's the pride of southwestern Maine, the source of drinking water for the entire region, and home to trout and landlocked salmon. My father often took me fishing there when I was little. I had no trouble finding the Lakeside B & B, a large, white Victorian mansion behind a lawn and a flagpole.

I nodded at an old man sitting in a wicker chair on the wide veranda, went inside, and tapped the desk bell. A young woman in jeans emerged

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from down a long hall and walked toward me, all smiles. She was pretty and had brown hair drawn back to a ponytail.

"I'm looking for Calysta Frye," I said.

She picked a headset off a wall bracket and spoke into it. Listened a while. "She wants to know who you are," she said, laughing. "Are you selling something?"

"No." I gave her my name.

She talked a while with her back to me, finally turned. "What's it about?"

"A property she once owned on Brackett Shores."

The name evidently meant nothing to the girl, but it got me what I wanted. Within a few minutes a short, plump woman in jeans and a white blouse marched up the corridor bristling with hostility. She dismissed the girl and turned on me.

"Okay, tough guy. You get your ass out of here and tell Porky to leave me alone or I'll call the cops."

"Ho! Wait a minute. Porky? You mean Porky Johnson?"

"Don't get cute, I know a goon when I see one. Now turn around and get the hell out of here."

I couldn't help laughing and apparently had enough surprise on my face to convince her I wasn't a threat.

"You just told me more than I expected to hear," I said.

The girl in jeans was watching from down the corridor. Seeing a five-foot woman confronting a six-foot-three man must have looked comical. I might have laughed, but I didn't.

"I just came here to ask a few questions," I said. "I know Porky, but I don't work for him."

"What questions?"

"He's mixed up in something he's trying to hide. Did he threaten you?"

That got a stubborn nothing.

"Did Gina Spalitro call you?"

"That bitch." She drew back. "Who are you?"

"Eight years ago a policeman was murdered on the rocks below your cottage on Brackett Shores. That man was my father."

She gave that some thought, studying my face. "Yeah," she said. "Your picture was in the paper. I remember."

"I used to think he was there checking on your operation. But I'm beginning to think he was there looking for Porky Johnson."

A wariness came into her expression. "Let's go inside."

When she turned, the girl down the corridor scampered away.

Calysta brought me through a large room, past an old man and two women clustered at a table playing cards. One of the women, in a wheelchair, winked at me.

Calysta took my arm and led me through a doorway into an office,

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pointed me at a chair and walked around a desk and dropped into a high-backed swivel chair that dwarfed her.

"So what do you want?" she said, leaning forward, resting folded hands on the edge of a black plastic surface saver. "This about Gina Spalitro?"

"She important to Porky?"

"Used to be one of his favorites."

"He was a regular john?"

Calysta laughed. "We never called them that. We called them 'clients.'"

"But he came regularly to the cottage? Just for women or for drugs?"

"If you're trying to hang something on him, don't expect me to be a witness. I've put all that behind me. I don't give a shit about Porky Johnson or Gina Spalitro. They did me dirty, but that's all in the past."

I showed her the picture of Dixie Hardaway. She admitted he bought cocaine from her. Whether he was at the cottage the night of the murder, she couldn't say.

"But Porky was," she said.

"Want to talk about it?"

She cocked her head to one side. "Sure you're not a cop? You act like a cop."

"Used to be," I said. "I'm a private investigator. Not representing a client. I'm here on my own."

"And no friend of Porky Johnson."

"Right."

She leaned back in the chair, folding jeweled hands across her belly. "I just got a call from Gina. But I'm sure she was talking for him. Must be they're back together."

"Warning you to keep your mouth shut."

"Yeah. Other people got that call?"

"A few."

"It was a threat. I don't like being threatened," staring at me to be sure I got that straight. "Okay. You want to know about that Saturday night."

"Anything you can tell me."

As though relieved to finally get it out, she told me about Porky's affair with Gina. "It doesn't happen often, but they got something going. She was the only one he wanted. It was like every week he came over. You could see her face light up when he walked in. Then it stopped. One night she ran up to him like she always did, arms outstretched, expecting a loving hug, and he shoved her aside and went for a different girl. Gina couldn't believe it. She thought he was kidding. But he wasn't. She went after the other girl and Porky knocked her across the room and told her she bored him. That was Friday night. Saturday night I found her in a corner crying. She wouldn't talk to me. I never found out what happened. A couple of days later, I was in the tank. I never saw her again until the trial."

"Who was the other girl?"

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"She called herself Aurora Borealis." Laughing, she added, "I don't think it was her real name."

"And you don't know where I can find her."

"Maybe Porky does. But those kids disappear."

Mike's wife Laura and their daughter were coming out of Mike's office when I entered the squad room at the police station. Laura gave me a wet kiss while her daughter giggled.

"Where you been keeping yourself?"

"Here and there," I said. She had put on a little weight but was still easy to look at with her abundant dark hair and playful eyes.

"When you gonna get married?"

"Come on, Laura. I'm too young."

She punched my arm and walked away laughing, the daughter skipping along at her side.

"Means, motive, and opportunity," Mike said, leaning back in his chair, tapping something on the keyboard of his computer. "All I've had until now is motive and means. She's sure he was out there that night?"

"Friday and Saturday night."

"But just for the women. Not drugs?"

"You told me not to talk about drugs, remember?" I smiled. "Is that what you're trying to pin on him?"

He ignored the question. "So it doesn't give us much."

"Why don't you tell me what you're looking for? I won't take it anywhere."

Mike sighed, glanced into the squad room through opened blinds on the glass walls. "There's something in his file from years ago. What we know that's relevant is that he frequented that cottage. Now we know he was there that Saturday night."

"Relevant to what? Your investigation?"

He didn't answer, and I didn't repeat the question. But I was getting closer.

Next day at a little luncheonette on Congress Street I sat for an hour with Nora Murphy. She'd called asking to meet me. We were eating quiche. She looked worried, said she hadn't slept, said she was frightened for her son.

"The reason I called," she said, "I didn't tell you everything," moving a spoon around her coffee mug, not looking at me, giving me a chance to examine lines of worry in her face.

"What'd you leave out?"

"That I caught him in the bathroom leaning over a few lines of white powder." She poured salt on the Formica and drew circles in it with her finger. "Something else," she said.

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"About that Saturday night?"

"He was gone for about two hours. Not unusual. He often did that, and I never asked where he went." She glanced past me at something across the room. Making this "confession" was obviously difficult. "I spent this morning at the newspaper library going over accounts of that weekend. I don't know how I missed reading about your father."

"You had other things to worry about."

She tossed her head and looked squarely at me. "If you say he went to Brackett Shores that night to buy cocaine, I couldn't deny it. I didn't question things he did. I was afraid of losing him," and that brought a smile of irony.

"Look, it's a fair assumption that Porky Johnson told his girlfriend to call Florida and threaten Dixie. He wouldn't want his fingerprints on that phone call. He must believe that Dixie knows something that can hurt him. And it's fair to think Dixie might have told you what it is."

"But he didn't. Am I in danger?"

"Porky's a dangerous man, but he's not stupid. He'll do what he can to intimidate you, but . . ."

"But what?"

"I guess it depends on what he's trying to hide."

"You think he killed your father?"

"I don't know. But who else had access to squad room gossip that could have told him my father was there? It was dark down at those rocks. How'd the killer know it was my father?"

Nora sucked salt off her fingertip. "My testimony isn't worth much, is it?"

"To get a conviction? No. But Dixie's could be. The trouble is he's out of state and his father probably has an army of lawyers to keep him in Florida. We might not be able to get him up here."

"I'll get him up here," she said. And looking at her I knew she would.

I assured her that Dixie wouldn't risk arrest for having used drugs. All he'd have to do was tell the police why he had lied about where he was that Saturday night and why Porky Johnson had warned him to keep his mouth shut.

Nora kept her word. Within two days Dixie was in a chair in Mike's office. I was told he'd be there. I was told not to show up. Mike filled me in shortly after their meeting broke up.

"Porky knew Dixie was in Maine?"

"Dixie sat in on it," Mike said. "And they stood together down on the street after the meeting, Porky tapping him on the chest with a hard finger."

"What did Dixie give you?"

"He admitted lying. Didn't want his father to know about his habit."

"Did he see anything?"

"He saw Porky early in the evening with a woman. They were outside."

"Anything about my father?"

"Said he didn't know it had happened until he read it in the newspaper.

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It's why he got scared. It's why he lied. Said he made a buy and left. It corroborates what Nora Murphy told you, right?"

"So you had no reason to hold him. What'd he say about the phone call from Gina Spalitro?"

"That made him nervous. He kept glancing at Porky. Admitted she had 'warned' him, is the word he used, to keep his mouth shut about what he knew. He said he had no idea what she was talking about—saying it as much to Porky as to me, like denying it for Porky's benefit, Porky taking it all in but saying nothing."

"So what was gained?"

"Not a hell of a lot," Mike said. "I didn't throw hard questions at him, didn't want to tip my hand."

"About what?"

He studied me for half a minute. "Let me ask you a question."

"Shoot."

"Five bullets were shot into your father's back and we found two slugs in the sand near the body. Does that sound like the action of a trained policeman, especially where potential witnesses were only a few hundred feet away?"

"I've thought of that," I said. "It could come from long, pent-up resentment of being stalked."

"Yes, but it raises doubts. I don't like Porky, but he's a damned good investigator. I have to respect him for that. I can't even hint that he's a suspect until I have it down on all fours."

So that's why Mike wouldn't tell me everything. It was finally out in the open. For years, apparently, Porky had been under investigation for frequenting a whorehouse and possibly dealing in drugs.

It had cost me almost a month's pay to have an oversized shower installed in my bathroom, but I was telling myself, while hot water poured down my back, that I'd do it again. Man, it felt good. I was rinsing soap from my hair, tilting my head back to keep soap from my eyes when the phone rang. I let it ring. I finished showering and walked naked into my office. The call had come from Eloise Hoagy. I called her. She picked up after the first ring.

"Oh, thank God," she said. "I was just about to call the police."

"About what?"

"It's Nora. We were on the phone—"

"Slow down," I said.

"She was talking about her son, about the legal arrangements, and wondering whether to go to Florida. She hadn't seen him in a while. Then I heard loud pounding like a fist hitting a door. She put down the phone. I could hear voices, but I couldn't make out anything. Then the phone went dead.

"Nora would never cut me off like that. Something's wrong, Duff. Please, can you drive up there?"

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I said I would. "Maybe it's something to do with her mother, a relapse. Something like that. I'll get back to you."

I threw on some clothes and hurried up the hill to Nora's house.

A Ford Taurus I recognized as Porky Johnson's and a beat-up panel truck were parked behind Nora's Escort at the curb. I made a U-turn and pulled up behind the truck, fetched my Beretta from beneath my seat, wedged it into my pocket, and went up the steps to Nora's back door.

I heard Porky yelling something, then the sound of furniture being knocked over. I pushed the door open, stepped past a mop and bucket, opened the kitchen door quietly. Porky was in the doorway to the front room, crouched, holding his pistol in both hands, aimed at Gina Spalitro, who had an arm around Nora's neck, dragging her backward.

"Let her go!" Porky yelled, ignoring me.

"You're trying to frame me, you son of a bitch!" Gina yelled. She saw me, gave me a brief snarl, looked back at Porky.

"Just let her go," Porky said.

Then I saw the knife Gina was holding against Nora's neck. "Get out of here, both of you!" she yelled.

I got out my Beretta and aimed it, when I saw a flash of madness in Gina's eyes. Before I could pull the trigger, Porky fired his pistol. A stunned look froze Gina's features. The knife dropped to the floor, and Nora slumped to her knees. Gina fell backward onto the kitchen counter, knocking a coffee pot into the sink.

"Put that away," Porky told me, meaning my Beretta. I stuffed it into my pocket and hurried over to Nora. She was crying, badly frightened but okay. Her mother was calling from the other room.

"Stay here," Porky said. He hurried outside, came back, and raised Gina into his arms and carried her outside. Porky didn't come back inside.

A few hours later we were upstairs in Captain Wetherell's office. Porky was in a padded chair with me next to him. Mike was in another chair, angled out so that he could watch me and Porky.

"And just before she died," the captain said, skepticism all over his face as he read from a typed report, "Gina Spalitro confessed to shooting Captain Frank Kerrigan. And you're the only witness to that."

"It's the truth, Captain," Porky said. "She thought it was me down there on the sand with a woman. It was dark."

"And why would she think that?"

Porky looked resentfully at me and Mike, wishing we weren't there. He said, "Because it could've been. It's where she and I used to go. I never wanted to use those bedrooms."

The captain held up a gas station receipt Porky had given him. "And you were twenty miles away at the time of the shooting, assuming we know exactly when the murder took place."

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"I don't think Detective Johnson shot Captain Kerrigan," Mike said.

The captain considered that. "But it doesn't look good that she died before she could talk to anyone else. And it sure as hell doesn't look good that it was you who shot her," glaring at Porky.

"He saved Nora Murphy's life," I said. "It was a good shoot."

The captain grudgingly acknowledged that. He wasn't satisfied, but he didn't argue. "There'll be a formal hearing," he said, "and all of you will be under oath." He put papers back into a folder, looked at each of us, and said, "Dismissed."

Outside, watching Porky go down the corridor, I asked Mike, "Are *you* convinced he didn't tell Gina to make those phone calls?"

"Let it go," Mike said. "Porky's career won't survive this."

"But do you believe it was Gina Spalitro who killed my father?"

He gave it the same helpless shrug that was wandering around inside of me.

"She could have."

"There's the gun," I said.

"You didn't see a gun."

"But what else could she have been reaching for? Don't we have evidence enough for a warrant to take a look?"

"Let's find out," he said.

We obtained a warrant and the police found the gun under the counter at Altieri's Market. It was registered to Gina's father. She had apparently used it, then put it back under the counter eight years ago. Because at the time there was no reason to think she had motive to kill a cop, she thought she would never be a suspect or that her father's gun would ever be connected to the shooting. Instead of throwing the gun into the ocean, she cleaned and oiled it then returned it back behind the counter.

The forensic examination concluded that the slugs found in the sand and in Frank Kerrigan's body had come from that gun. At the hearing it was determined that Gina had mistaken my father for Porky Johnson and had shot him in a psychotic jealous rage.

Porky Johnson was fired.

HOW TO SOLVE AN ACROSTIC

Using the definitions, fill in as many words as you can in the column on the right. Then transfer the letters from the column to their corresponding places in the diagram. A black square in the diagram indicates the end of a word. When completed, the diagram will yield a mystery-themed quotation. The initial letters of the words in the righthand column spell out the name of the author and the work from which the quote was taken.

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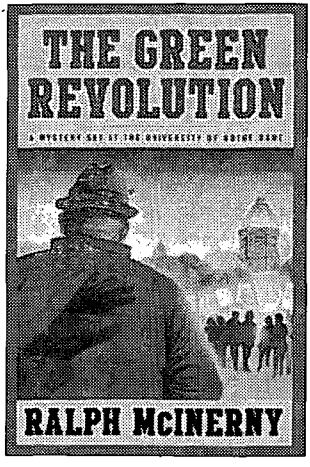
BOOKED & PRINTED

ROBERT C. HAHN

America's love of sports blends naturally with its love of mysteries to yield a winning combination in several recent novels.

Few colleges have richer traditions of fielding winning football teams than Notre Dame, but seasoned pro Ralph McInerny uses one of the university's poorest seasons ever as the focus for THE GREEN REVOLUTION (St. Martin's Minotaur, $24.95).

The prolific McInerny is perhaps best known for his many Father Dowling mysteries, but *The Green Revolution* is his twelfth Notre Dame mystery featuring the brothers Roger and Philip Knight. Since McInerny has taught at Notre Dame for more than fifty years, he is eminently qualified to convey the issues, the passions, and even the humor that roiled the campus and the faithful everywhere.



In 2007 the proud Notre Dame football team managed only three wins against nine losses. Their performance caused such consternation that McInerny's fictional take seems perfectly credible. As the season wears on with one dispiriting defeat following another, some call for the coach's dismissal. That would include Iggie Willis, fanatical alum who creates a Web site specifically to campaign for firing the coach.

Another group of alumni, known as the Weeping Willow Society, have more basic concerns about the direction Notre Dame is going as a university, such as the decreasing number of Catholic faculty members. And one faculty member, Professor Horst Lipschutz, in order to further his own ambitious plans, seeks to eliminate Notre Dame's football program entirely—a move that many would see as heretical.

Roger, the Huneker Professor of Catholic Studies, and his brother Philip, a private investigator, share parents and an apartment but not much else. Phil is a devoted football fan; Roger's interest in the sport is "theoretical and remote." Just as Roger's name appears on a list of those supporting ending the football program, Phil is called upon by the university when one the most vocal critics of the current football regime is permanently silenced. McInerny handles the calamitous 2007 football season with

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exactly the right amount of humor and seriousness as the brothers Knight tackle one more killer on the South Bend campus.

Two new mysteries take the Boston Red Sox as a backdrop: Rick Shefchik's *Green Monster* and mother-son duo Mary-Ann Tirone Smith and Jere Smith's *Dirty Water.* Both incorporate serious issues facing professional baseball while delivering entertaining mysteries.

GREEN MONSTER (Poisoned Pen, $24.95) features Sam Skarda, a Minnesota P.I. whose first case, recounted in *Amen Corner* (Poisoned Pen, 2007) was a murder that took place during the Masters golf tournament. Now Skarda is hired by Red Sox owner Lucky Louie Kenwood to handle a delicate, potentially ruinous matter that casts doubt on the Red Sox 2004 World Series victory.

Kenwood has received a letter demanding fifty million dollars or else a baseball player will reveal that the 2004 World Series was fixed—a revelation that would forever taint the Red Sox victory over the Cardinals. Kenwood turns to Skarda to investigate because he is not from Boston and he has been recommended by one of Kenwood's friends.

Skarda, an ex-cop who plays guitar in a pick-up band, is pretty new at the P.I. business, but he agrees to investigate discreetly. Suspicion centers on two Cardinal players, Ivan Hurtado and Alberto Miranda, who had terrific seasons but performed so poorly in the Series that the Red Sox swept the Cardinals. If they did try to throw the series, then there must have been substantial gambling money behind the fix.

Once Skarda starts looking into the matter he realizes that whether or not there was a fix, there is definitely someone inside Kenwood's own organization who is involved in the extortion. And Skarda finds plenty of suspicious characters, including Kenwood's beautiful assistant Heather Canby and his chauffeur Paul O'Brien.

From Boston to L.A. to South America, Skarda follows a twisted and dangerous path to truth. With a slate of fictional characters, Shefchik spins a good tale combining the seedy world of sports gambling, the pressures on ballplayers (in spite of extravagant contracts), and the jealousy and hatred that a wealthy owner such as Kenwood can inspire.

Mary-Ann Tirone Smith and Jere Smith's take on the Red Sox in DIRTY WATER (Hall of Fame Press, $22.95) is equally as entertaining as *Green Monster.* The Smiths explore a different kind of problem affecting baseball—unscrupulous agents and the recruitment of foreign-born players of questionable age and pedigree, but unlike Shifchick's novel, they cast their book with actual Red Sox players.

The threat to the team comes in a small bundle found in the players' clubhouse—an infant. Then comes the leak of a photograph of a woman purported to be the infant's mother—a photo of the girlfriend of phenomenal teenage pitcher from the Dominican Republic, Luis Sanseverra, who's playing for a Red Sox affiliate. Then Sanseverra goes missing, a

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woman is murdered, and it all falls in the lap of Boston homicide detective Rocky Patel, an American of Indian heritage of whom it was said "he had Jesus in his heart but Shiva in his blood."

The Smiths use the Red Sox players and coaches as characters in their mystery with great panache (particularly David "Big Papi" Ortiz), making the players and their roles seem natural and appropriate. That coupled with their clever use of excerpts taken from bloggers exchanging insights about the Red Sox creates an insider's atmosphere very effectively, capturing what is going through the minds of the players in the clubhouse and of the fans in the stands as the season develops.

Robert Greer's BLACKBIRD, FAREWELL (Frog Books, $25.95) examines the fates of two superb college basketball players who led their team all the way to the NCAA finals.

Robert Greer's novels featuring former bail bondsman and private eye C. J. Floyd (*The Fourth Perspective, The Mongoose Deception*) have already introduced readers to his godson, Damion Madrid. Madrid has finished his college basketball career in stellar fashion as half of the Colorado State University combo known as Blood and Bird—Madrid and Shandell Bird.

Now, in *Blackbird, Farewell,* Madrid is one his way to medical school and Bird, the number one draft choice of the Denver Nuggets, is on his way to fame and fortune. That is, until Bird is gunned down with reporter Paul Grimes on a deserted center court playground.

The shock of Bird's death hits Madrid hard, and he determines to find out who killed his friend and why. Aided by C. J.'s partner, Flora Jean Benson, Madrid begins to ferret out what happened. C. J., on his honeymoon in Hawaii, is not there to help him, but C. J. asks hitman Pinkie Niedenmeyer and the old mobster Mario Satoni to watch out for his young godson as he journeys into a world of opportunists who are out to share the pie that Bird was never to enjoy.

Among the carrion feeding circling Bird were his girlfriend; a sports psychologist; bookies; fixers; and pushers. Madrid soon learns how little he really knew about his friend and how little he knew about the realities of college basketball, which is no game at all but a deadly serious contest where only the strong survive. *Blackbird, Farewell* is billed as a C. J. Floyd novel, but Damion Madrid is the focus of this one and the young man proves equal to the billing.

In Bill Pronzini's latest novel, THE OTHER SIDE OF SILENCE (Walker, $24), Rick Fallon is in search of peace following the death of his only son and his failed marriage. He drives to Death Valley, the only place that soothes him, where he stumbles on a troubled, suicidal woman, Casey

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Dunbar. When Fallon learns that her own young son is in peril at the hands of her ex-husband, his ex-Army instincts kick into high gear: He sets off on a lone quest through the Nevada underworld to untangle Dunbar's danger.

Pronzini, an MWA Grand Master, employs taut, bare-knuckle prose and complex characterization in this engrossing suspense story. The elements may be familiar—a solitary hero, a group of brutes, and a vulnerable woman—but in Pronzini's hands they make up an addictive chase. Fallon travels through the seedy corners of Las Vegas and Southern California, proving himself a thoroughly competent, haunted hero. Memories of his son weigh on him, and as he employs deception and violence in search of Dunbar's child, his search takes on an appealingly personal flavor. Readers will be pleased with the ending's expert twist, a development that brings Fallon far more than he bargained for. —*Laurel Fantauzzo*

ALL POINTS BULLETIN: Scottish writer Russel D. McLean's novel *The Good Son* was released in November 2008 from Five Leaves Publications in the U.K. The hardboiled writer also recently sold his first two novels to Thomas Dunne Books here in America, so look for *The Good Son* and *Lost Sister* at stateside bookstores soon.

Solution to the January/February "Dying Words"

WORD LIST

A. Mirroring
B. Amherst
C. Riffraff
D. Investment
E. Liftoffs
F. Youthfully
G. Noises
H. Stooping
I. Tenets
J. Amplitude
K. Semester
L. Ivy league
M. Otter
N. Stitching
O. Hiccoughs
P. Annoyance
Q. Phenomenon
R. Eye shadow
S. Surveyor
T. Hawthorne
U. Ivory Coast
V. Fishermen
W. Trooper
X. Earth Tone
Y. Reprehend

QUOTATION

Author—Marilyn Stasio
Work—SHAPE SHIFTER *(The New York Times,* April 9, 2006.)

"One of the crimes . . . in Thomas Perry's . . . Nightlife . . . involves one woman rummaging through another woman's purse . . . this creepy incident of identity theft taps into the . . . fear that drives Perry's . . . novels—the terror of losing your name, your face, the essence of your self."

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BLIND EYE

S. W. HUBBARD

Holzer and Coughlin were on the way to finish what Danneman had begun.

"It pisses me off, that's all," Coughlin said.

Holzer stayed quiet. His partner's default position was pissed off. The angry young man, Holzer called him. Danneman, a twenty-year patrolman, responded when the woman called 9-1-1 at daybreak to report her husband didn't come home last night. Rather than follow up on a few details, Danneman quickly dumped the case on the detectives and went back to patrolling. No big deal.

"Danneman's such a lazy bastard." Coughlin's freckled hands gripped the steering wheel as if he were navigating a road in Baghdad, not suburban Connecticut. "He doesn't have enough ambition to scratch his own ass."

Danneman was lazy, no argument there. But working a missing persons case, even if it turned out to be a husband who simply overslept in his girlfriend's bed, beat sitting in the office. And no one hated deskwork on a sunny day more than Sean Coughlin, so why gripe about pulling this case? Mr. Glass Half Empty, that was Coughlin.

"And on top of being lazy, he's cheap, know what I mean? He never paid me back for—"

"Turn here," Holzer said.

Coughlin stomped on the brake and jerked the wheel. The Crown Vic careened around the corner onto Evergreen Lane. "You could have warned me it was coming up."

Holzer could have answered that Coughlin knew the roads every bit as well as he did, having spent all thirty-four years of his life in Palmyrton, Connecticut. And Holzer could have mentioned that Coughlin would have accused him of backseat driving if he had pointed out the turn earlier. But Holzer kept quiet. That's how he'd survived three years as Coughlin's partner when no one else had made it three months.

Coughlin took the next turn sedately, and they pulled up in front of a trim colonial with a flagstone walk, the home of Brian and Michelle Fanning. Handmade Halloween decorations hung in the windows. A flag shaped like a witch on a broomstick fluttered in the breeze.

Coughlin scowled. "Guy better get his ass back home, he knows what's good for him."

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Hank Blaustein

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In the midst of a messy divorce, Coughlin's baseline irritability ratcheted up whenever he was reminded of children. He'd been talking excitedly about having kids with Patty, right up to the day she packed her bags and ran off to Boston. Personally, Holzer was relieved, although he didn't let on. Having four sons himself, he knew a marriage needed to be rock solid to survive the arrival of a baby. Patty and Sean had been a soap opera from day one. No, Coughlin wasn't ready for fatherhood. Not now, maybe never.

"If his ass is in one piece," Holzer said as he rapped on the shiny red front door. Danneman had told them the Fannings were building a new house a few miles out, where cul-de-sacs butted up against horse pastures. When he went out there to look for Brian Fanning, Danneman found five big drops of blood soaked into the plywood floor of the prospective living room, prompting him to turn the disappearance over to the detectives. Now Holzer and Coughlin would start over with the wife, without letting her know what the patrolman had found. The blood might be nothing—a carpenter who cut himself on a protruding nail.

Or it could mean Brian Fanning was never coming home.

Behind the door came the sound of running, then a woman's voice. "Wait, Natalie. I'll answer it."

The door opened on a beautiful little girl, maybe four years old, swathed in a long, glittery pink dress. Big green eyes stared up at Holzer from under a cloud of red-gold curls. Her skin looked too delicate to withstand the rigors of childhood as it was lived in the Holzer house—mountain biking, skateboarding, tackle football indoors and out. She wore a crown and carried a wand.

"Hey, you must be my fairy godmother," Holzer said, crouching down to her level.

She squinted, clearly surprised that people as dim witted as him were allowed out unsupervised. "I'm Glinda, Good Witch of the North." With great dignity, she pivoted and marched down the hall.

Now Michelle Fanning found her voice, and it was tinged with anxiety. "Are you policemen? You're not the ones who were here earlier. What's happened?"

They introduced themselves and followed Mrs. Fanning into the living room. Holzer and Coughlin exchanged a glance and a grin as they watched her move inside tight jeans. From behind, she looked like a slender but curvy teenager. When she sat down and faced them they could see by the faint worry lines etched in her fair skin that she was in her early thirties. But with the same red-gold hair and green eyes as her daughter, she was a beauty.

Holzer felt more uneasy now about the blood. Surely any man married to a woman like Michelle would have damn little reason to stray. But then, gorgeous women were often drawn to jerks. Look at Patty and Coughlin.

"Have you found my husband? Is he . . . hurt?"

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"We haven't found him, Mrs. Fanning," Coughlin said. "We just need to, uh, clarify a few things."

Michelle Fanning sat on the edge of her chair, eager to help. Holzer didn't want to meet her pleading green gaze. He knew she thought if she answered all their questions accurately they'd be obligated, through some cosmic quid pro quo, to deliver her husband safe and sound. In his line of work it didn't always happen that way. Nice people were often disappointed; jerks escaped the fate they deserved.

"When's the last time you saw your husband, ma'am?" Holzer asked.

"Last night at dinner. Brian came home from work early so we could eat together as a family. At eight, after the kids were in bed, he went back into the office to finish up a few things."

"Works late a lot?" Coughlin glanced around the living room, as if making cocktail conversation. Casual, chatty, full of Irish charm: No one could turn it on—and off—faster than Sean. Meanwhile, Holzer played the straight man, the one who wanted only the facts.

"He has customers in Japan. He has to work on their schedule." Mrs. Fanning sat up stiffly, refusing to relax into the easy chair.

Coughlin smiled sympathetically, glancing at a framed photo that showed Natalie with a little boy a few years older. "Must be rough with two little ones. Do you usually wait up for him?"

"I try to. But I've had a cold and last night I took some medicine. I dozed off and didn't wake up till six this morning. Brian wasn't here."

"Was it that dark green stuff?" Coughlin leaned forward, his head cocked in concern. "The kind you take in a little cup? Man, that knocks me out too."

And they were off. Sean and Michelle, chatting like old friends. She admitted she was a nurse and should have known better than to take that cough syrup after having a glass of wine at dinner. A nurse? Did she work at the hospital? No, part time for a private agency—more flexible, with the kids.

Holzer watched and listened, unobtrusively taking notes. Despite the difficult questions about her husband—Could he have been having an affair? Did he use drugs? Did he gamble?—Michelle never bristled. No, no, no, she answered firmly. The only sign of distress was the constant motion of her hands. Holzer watched them twisting the hem of her sweater, rubbing her temples, fluttering through her hair. Michelle's hands were hardly bigger than a child's, the skin smooth and white. A sizeable diamond slipped and sparkled on her left ring finger. He couldn't imagine those hands changing diapers, scrubbing pots. Not that she came across as a princess. Just too delicate for the hard work of motherhood.

He liked the way she conducted herself with Coughlin. Michelle Fanning didn't fall back on her looks. She met Coughlin's eyes, and didn't look away, even when she didn't like the question.

"About the new house, Mrs. Fanning, it's part of a development?"

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"No. We have our own architect."

Coughlin arched his eyebrows. "Any chance your husband might be in over his head? Paying the mortgage here, paying the construction costs there?"

For the first time, Michelle looked doubtful. "I, I don't know. Brian handles our finances. He has an MBA." She bit her lip. "I'm happy here. But Brian wanted more privacy. He said it would be a good investment."

Little Natalie charged into the room waving a sheet of paper and a crayon. "Mommy, my yellow crayon doesn't work! I have to have it or my picture will be *ruined*."

Michelle extended her arms and Natalie ran into her embrace. Ignoring the detectives, she patiently peeled back the paper on the offending crayon. "There you go, sweetie. All fixed."

"Thank you, Mommy." Natalie held the paper out. "Look what I'm making for Daddy! Do you think he'll like it?"

It was a picture of a house, with four lopsided windows, a half-finished smiley sun, and a squiggle of smoke coming from the chimney. Michelle wrapped her arms around Natalie and buried her face in her daughter's curls. A long minute passed, then Natalie scampered off. Michelle's face was streaked with tears.

Coughlin backed all the way down the driveway before he spoke.

"She knows he's dead."

"Sure she's worried," Holzer agreed. "But it's too soon for her to give up hope."

"No hoping. She knows exactly what happened to him."

Holzer twisted around to face his partner. "You're thinking she was involved in his disappearance? How the hell do you get that from what she told us?"

"Why else did she call 9-1-1, instead of checking with the hospital first to see if he had an accident? Isn't that what you'd do if Jan didn't come home?"

"Everyone reacts differently. It's a big leap to say she knows he's dead."

"Wait and see. That's one cold bitch."

For once it was Coughlin who remained calm while Holzer grew agitated. "How can you say that? She was cooperative. She was holding herself together for the sake of her kids, but she was clearly distressed."

The hint of a smile played across Coughlin's broad face. "She oughta be distressed. I'm gonna nail her ass."

For the rest of the afternoon, the partners worked the case from different angles. Coughlin focused on Brian Fanning's business, an import/export firm, while Holzer followed up with the contractor building the new house. Driving out to the site, Holzer thought about what his partner

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believed. Clearly another of Coughlin's famous hunches. Sean had earned a rep for having some kind of second sight when he was a rookie patrolman. Responding to a call about a boy found facedown in a stream, Sean had preserved the scene in the presence of the hysterical family. As he turned the case over to his superiors, Sean had said, "The stepbrother did it." And, after weeks of investigation and forensic analysis, it turned out the death wasn't a tragic accident; the stepbrother really had killed the kid. There had been other hunches, too, not as dramatic but still spot-on.

Coughlin being Coughlin, he got testy when the guys asked him to forecast point spreads for the football pool, or pick a lucky lottery number. He insisted he was just very good at detecting the subtle signs of guilt. Except in his own marriage. Patty fooled around with the stockbroker dude for months before she took off. Coughlin never saw it coming. Holzer shook his head as he drove. Sean didn't know squat about women.

Holzer stopped daydreaming when he saw "Fanning" spray-painted in orange on a scrap of wood, and made the turn. The unpaved road twisted through the trees for nearly a quarter mile before opening up to a big cleared space. Holzer whistled. The unfinished house was twice the size of Brian and Michelle's colonial. A house like this would set you back a cool two mil, easy.

Trucks and vans were arrayed around the site and the rhythmic sound of a nail gun pierced the crisp air. Holzer found the general contractor and asked his questions as the boss looked over the day's work. The GC said Brian Fanning was pleasant enough, picky about the details of his new home but not unreasonable. The wife had been out to the site a few times. They never argued; she held her husband's hand and let herself be shown around.

"The uniformed officer found some blood out here this morning," Holzer said. "Know anything about that?"

"Happened late yesterday afternoon. Manny cut himself pretty bad with a hacksaw. I had to take him to the ER for stitches."

Holzer paused in front of what would be a huge window. The property dropped away in the back, providing a panoramic view of the valley. You couldn't see another house from this angle, just trees and the glint of gray granite outcroppings. Maybe Fanning wanted to play lord and master over a big spread but came up short of cash. Maybe he was ashamed to admit failure. Would that make a man walk away from a beautiful woman like Michelle and two great kids? Holzer sighed. You only had to be on this job a few months to learn people had an endless capacity for screwed-up decision-making.

A flash of white moved through the woods. Barks mixed with the nailing and sawing as a sleek pointer streaked into the clearing. The GC whistled and the dog bounded up a plywood ramp into the house. Holzer took a step back. He liked dogs, but this one was filthy and smelled funky.

"Jeez, Uno, what'd you get into?" the GC asked.

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Uno sat and looked at them with bright-eyed expectation. The white fur of his muzzle and front paws was stained a deep reddish brown. It wasn't the color of the rocky Connecticut soil, and there hadn't been rain for weeks.

When Holzer arrived home that night Jan and the older boys were in the driveway playing a spirited game of two-on-two, while Lukey cheered. He watched his wife sink a shot from over near the garbage cans. She'd played for UConn until a tendon tear sidelined her, but she still had a helluva hook. He shook his head as she stole the rebound from her oldest son, elbowing the next younger one out of her way. Jan would walk through fire for her kids, but she didn't hesitate to knock them down on the basketball court.

The boys caught sight of him and the game was forgotten.

"Daddy, Daddy—I'm playing on Mommy's team and we're winning."

"She scored all the baskets, you little twerp. Hey, Dad, guess what? I got a ninety-eight on my math test."

"Dad, can we go to Sports Authority to get my new cleats? You promised."

"Daddeeee."

Holzer scooped up Luke and made it into the house with the rest of them tugging and tumbling and shouting around him. No matter how tired he was, this was the best part of the day. He thought of Michelle Fanning in her neat and pretty colonial. Was she making dinner for her kids right now? What would she say when they asked where Daddy was?

Arguing, complaining, bargaining, whining—the boys rolled through the usual evening activities. Jan kept glancing at him. She always knew when he needed to talk. It was after ten when the house got quiet and she finally dropped onto the couch beside him. Then Lukey reappeared. "Mommy, my ear hurts when I tug on it."

"Then don't tug on it. Go back to bed."

Holzer smiled despite his mood. The kids claimed they preferred going to school when they were sick to find some sympathy in the nurse's office.

"Now, what's wrong with you?" Jan asked.

Holzer began to talk. He told Jan how the dog had dug in an area where a large amount of human blood had been spilled. Someone had been killed or grievously injured in that spot, most likely Brian Fanning. Cadaver dogs searched the woods, but no body had been found. The ground was so rocky, the trees so dense that a deep grave was out of the question. Brian Fanning was still missing.

"Coughlin's convinced the wife murdered her husband," Holzer said. "There's no evidence to support it, but does that slow Coughlin down? No, he's determined to prove she did it, even if he has to twist the facts to fit the theory."

"You've always said Sean was a great investigator," Jan said. "What would make him so biased on this case?"

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"It's gotta be Patty. Sean's still so upset about his divorce, he sees every woman as evil. And I told him so. He just laughed and said, 'You'll see.'"

Holzer opened his eyes at five fifteen, already mapping out the day's arguments with Coughlin. Half an hour of muttering and thrashing later, Jan booted him out of bed. "Go for a run. You'll feel better."

The two-mile loop through the neighborhood burned off some tension. On his way back to the house, Holzer passed his elderly neighbor, Mrs. Spence, standing at the end of her driveway reading the headlines in the Palmyrton *Current*.

"Oh, dear . . . oh, how terrible. That sweet Michelle!" She waved the paper at Holzer. "Do you know anything about this poor man's disappearance?"

"Working on it, Mrs. Spence. Why—you know them?"

"Michelle Fanning was our hospice nurse when Charlie was dying. What an angel that girl was! So patient, so comforting. I don't know what I would've done without her."

Holzer crossed into her yard. "Michelle Fanning came here to your house?"

"Yes, twice a day at the end to administer morphine when the cancer spread to Charlie's bones. She kept him comfortable, so he didn't have to die alone in that awful hospital."

"So you must know her pretty well. She ever talk about her husband?"

"I'm afraid I did most of the talking. She was a wonderful listener." Mrs. Spence's lip trembled. "She helped me accept that it was Charlie's time . . . helped me let go."

Holzer dreaded a breakdown, but Mrs. Spence straightened her shoulders and folded her paper under her arm. "I'll always remember what that young woman told me. She said, 'Doctors are trained to think of death as defeat, so they fight it tooth and nail. In hospice we think of death as part of life. We help our patients meet it with dignity.'"

Mrs. Spence turned toward her house. "An angel."

"It's the only scenario that makes sense."

"Like hell it makes sense!" Holzer's sparse hair stood up in tufts above his red face. "Show me one scrap of solid evidence."

He and Coughlin had been squabbling for close to an hour, closing out the fourth day of the investigation. At the outset, others in the office had listened avidly, surprised to see Holzer so worked up. Coughlin drove them off with a few well-placed insults.

"Start where we always start," Coughlin said. "Who benefits from Brian's death? Michelle. Only Michelle. They owned everything jointly. Now it's all hers."

"She didn't need to kill him," Holzer countered. "She had everything she wanted—new house, nice car, clothes, jewelry. She worked because she wanted to."

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"Yeah, except she didn't want to enjoy the good life with Brian. She wanted to enjoy it with Dr. Neil Tollson."

"Half-assed assumption Number One. You have no evidence Michelle and Neil Tollson were having an affair."

"Ten calls a day to and from Tollson on Michelle's work-issued cell phone," Coughlin said. "Three times the number she made to any other doc."

"Michelle was nursing his patients. Everyone says he's very dedicated."

"Dedicated to getting laid."

Holzer slapped the desk. "Produce a witness who saw them kissing. Produce a motel receipt. You got nothing."

"I got the way people looked over my head and down at the floor and squirmed before they said no about Michelle and Tollson."

Holzer stared at his partner. So fierce, so proud. Holzer wanted to say, you were blind to it with Patty so now you see it everywhere, but he wasn't cruel enough. "All right," he continued, "explain how she got him out to the construction site from the office."

"We only have her word that he went to the office that night. Maybe he intended to go out to the new house all along and she followed him."

"If both their cars were out at the site, how did she get hers home and ditch his?"

"I never said she followed him in her car. You know how our Michelle keeps that hot body?" Coughlin tossed a photo across the desk: Michelle Fanning in running shorts, her arms raised in victory as she crossed the finish line. "Taken at the Shoreline Half Marathon last month. Brian hung it up at his office."

Christ, Coughlin had an answer for everything. "So she ran out there to kill her husband, leaving the kids home alone?"

"They were asleep."

Holzer threw his hands up. "A four-year-old and a seven-year-old? Do you have any idea how often kids that age wake up? Bad dream, glass of water, monster under the bed—Jan and I haven't had one night of uninterrupted sleep in the past fifteen years. If one of those kids woke up and found her gone—"

"A little Benadryl in the Juicy Juice," Coughlin said, "and they're out till morning."

"How can you prove that?"

"Can't. Stuff's out of their systems by now. I'm just saying—"

"You're just making this up as you go. And how did she kill him? Brian Fanning was six two, two hundred twenty pounds. Michelle's five foot three, one hundred ten, tops."

"Shot him. A gun makes anyone strong."

"What explains all that blood?"

"She hit an artery. Too bad for her she made a bigger mess than anticipated. Otherwise she might have got away with making it look like a disappearance."

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"Okay, what did she do with the body? We know it's not buried out there. We know Neil Tollson didn't help her move it because he was at an oncology conference in San Diego. How did little size four Michelle carry him out of those woods?" Holzer said this with a flourish, knowing he'd scored a point. Hell, even Jan wouldn't be able to move the dead weight of a man Fanning's size.

Coughlin pushed off his battered desk, rolling his chair toward the office coffee pot. "That's the one thing I haven't figured out." He tipped his mug in Holzer's direction. "When I get that, I'll nail her."

"I'm getting Luke's antibiotics now," Holzer reassured Jan by cell phone as he sat in the waiting area of the CVS pharmacy in Lyme. "I'll be home by six."

He hung up and checked his messages. Three from Coughlin. That could wait till morning. The strain between them had grown all week. The captain kept telling Coughlin he didn't have enough to arrest Michelle Fanning. At the same time, the Fannings' supporters were complaining to the mayor and writing letters to the editor that the police were harassing the family. They had a point. How many times could you interview the neighbors, the colleagues, the friends, before you had to accept they weren't going to give you what you were looking for? How long before you had to accept that what you were looking for wasn't there?

"Fifteen minutes," Holzer heard the pharmacist tell the next customer.

"Mommy, can I go look around the toy aisle?"

"Okay, but stay where I can see you."

Holzer glanced up just as Michelle Fanning turned. They stared at each other awkwardly. If anything, she looked even more beautiful than the first time Holzer laid eyes on her. The strain of being under suspicion showed in her face. But instead of looking haggard she came across as fragile, like the wildflowers Luke picked for Jan, then cried over because they didn't last.

"Hello, Mrs. Fanning." Holzer moved over on the bench, giving her plenty of room.

She nodded and sat. Neither spoke. The minutes ticked by. How long could it take to shake a few amoxicillin tabs into a bottle?

Michelle shrugged off her jacket and Holzer caught her delicate scent. Now she seemed much closer to him although the space between them hadn't changed. Her profile floated at the edge of his vision, the tumbling curls, the frail wrists. He fought an urge to face her and say, "I'm sorry! I'm sorry for your trouble, sorry my partner is making it worse." He imagined her crumpling into his arms and weeping on his shoulder.

"Mommy, look!" Little Natalie ran up, waving a small stuffed dog. "Isn't he cute? Can we buy him?"

Michelle sighed and stroked her daughter's cheek. "Sure, sweetie. If you like him."

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"Yea!" Natalie hugged the toy and spun around, catching sight of Holzer. "Hey, I know you." Her whole face scrunched into a frown. "You're a policeman. Have you caught the bad man who hurt my daddy yet?"

"Holzer!" the pharmacist barked.

The detective leaped up to claim his order. He wanted to pay and get out of there. Still, he glanced at the waiting area as he left. Mother and daughter studied him with big green eyes, mournful and wounded.

When Holzer walked into the office in the morning, Coughlin greeted him with a Verilli's bakery bag. "There you are! I couldn't have protected this Danish from poachers much longer."

Holzer accepted the offering, wary but hungry. Sean seemed unusually chipper. Maybe he got laid last night.

"Guess who showed up? Or maybe I should say, started showing up."

Holzer said nothing, just chewed and watched.

"Coupla kids walking their dog on the beach in Madison found a suitcase washed up on the sand. Poor little bastards opened it. Male human torso."

Holzer swallowed. The pecans felt like razors in his throat.

"Then we got a call from a fisherman in Old Saybrook. Pulled two male legs in a rolling duffle bag out of the Sound. ME looked at 'em. Says they were removed by someone with medical training. Also says the femoral artery in the left thigh was slashed." Coughlin dunked a donut in coffee. "Head hasn't turned up yet. That's probably in the carry-on."

"For Christ's sake!" Holzer tossed his Danish in the trash.

Coughlin leaned across his desk. "What's the matter, Pete? Feelin' a little queasy knowing that your precious Michelle diced her husband up? That she bled him out like a butchered hog and packed him into matching luggage for easy disposal? I figure she tossed the bags off the bridge into the Connecticut River. The current carried them out to the Sound, but last night's storm brought them back in."

The smug satisfaction on his partner's face ignited a bottle rocket of fury within Holzer. "This has gone far enough! I won't let you destroy this woman's life when you have no proof, no—"

Coughlin flipped open a file folder. His calm confidence sucked the fight right out of Holzer.

"Remember when we searched their financial records?" Coughlin asked. "Never found any big, unusual expenditures. Every month pretty much the same. Every month Michelle spends about two hundred bucks at Costco. You know you have to show your member ID card to shop. They keep track of every item you buy. Last month Michelle spent $430 bucks there. I thought I'd see why."

Coughlin slid a copy of the bill across the desk. It lay there, as attractive and repellent as a fiery roadside wreck.

Holzer forced himself to look. Circled in red: 3pc whld lugg set . . .

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$230.00. In that one line, Holzer could see clear to the end of the investigation. He knew Michelle wouldn't be able to produce the luggage. He knew Neil Tollson would admit the affair.

Coughlin stood up and thrust his powerful arms into his sports coat. "It's like Patty used to tell me when we were moving into our condo—pack three light boxes instead of one big heavy box. Women have little strategies to compensate for their weakness."

"Why are you sitting in the dark?" Jan popped her head into the family room, where Holzer stared at a black TV with a glass in his hand. "Is that *scotch*?" She sat down beside him. "So Sean was right about Mrs. Fanning. Does it matter that much?"

Holzer stared at his wife, drinking in every detail of her familiar face: the slight gap in her smile, the worry crease between her brows, the freckles, fading now that summer was over. Then he looked down at her strong, capable hands and imagined a hunting knife there. The vision sent a tremor through his body.

"Pete, what is it?"

"She lured him outside, Jan. She must've stuck him with a needle full of morphine and when he collapsed, she slit his femoral artery and watched while he bled out. Then she cut him apart just like you do with the turkey carcass so you can fit it in the soup pot."

Janice winced in disgust, but that wasn't enough for Holzer.

"She met a guy she liked better than Brian. So she chopped up the father of her children." He drained the scotch, banging the glass onto the end table. "How do you explain that to your kids? If you killed their dad during a struggle, maybe you could hope someday they'd understand. But this . . ."

Jan massaged his hands, rolling the thick, callused fingers between her own. "You liked her, didn't you?"

Holzer pulled his wife into a rough embrace. She smelled of pot roast and Play-Doh and Mr. Bubble. His tears soaked into her gray-brown hair.

"I'm sorry," he murmured, but Jan didn't seem to hear.

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SOLUTION TO THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER

He'd arrested a kid once for shooting out every streetlight on a block, and when he'd asked him why he did it the answer came, "Because I like it dark."

—S. W. Hubbard

From "Chainsaw Nativity" (AHMM January/February, 2008)

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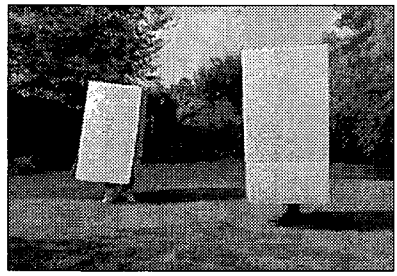

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BOX SET

JEFF PETRILL

"Are you ready?" Jack said to his brother, Ted.

Ted nodded. "Sure. We'll surprise Jerry. Does he know we've got these two empty refrigerator boxes?"

"No, he . . ." Jack looked across the field. "Hold it. He's coming already! look at him run! Hide in your box and when he gets here, we'll jam our boxes together and block him. Use your hands to lift and brace yourself for the hit."

"All right. Let's hurry."

The twelve-year-old twins smiled. Each one climbed inside his box, spaced about ten yards apart.

Jack peeked out from a small hole. "He's coming fast. Okay, now!"

The two boxes rose and rushed together like magnets.

The runner, glancing behind and forward and behind, smacked into the obstacle. The boys inside the boxes fell back, then rolled, pinning him down.

"Jerry, are you okay?" Jack said, laughing and climbing out.

"Hey, that's not Jerry!" Ted said, his box ripped open.

A policeman sprinted to them. "Boys, get away!" But the cop stopped and gawked at the fallen runner. "You got him! He's a notorious serial killer!"

"He is?" Ted said.

"How did you do it?" the officer said. "You knocked him out cold!"

Jack shrugged. "We're boxers."

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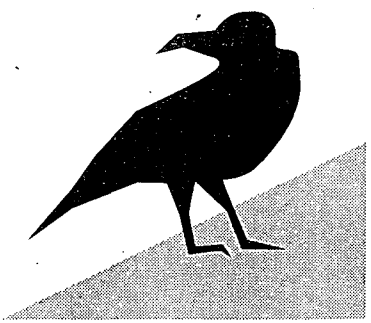

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE (ISSN:0002-5224), Vol. 54, No. 3, March 2009. Published monthly except for combined January/February and July/August double issues by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. Annual subscription $55.90 in the U.S.A. and possessions, $65.90 elsewhere, payable in advance in U.S. funds (GST included in Canada). Subscription orders and correspondence regarding subscriptions should be sent to 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. Or, to subscribe, call 1-800-220-7443. Editorial Offices: 475 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016. Executive Offices: 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. Periodical postage paid at Norwalk, CT and additional mailing offices. Canadian postage paid at Montreal, Quebec, Canada Post International Publications Mail, Product Sales Agreement No. 40012460.
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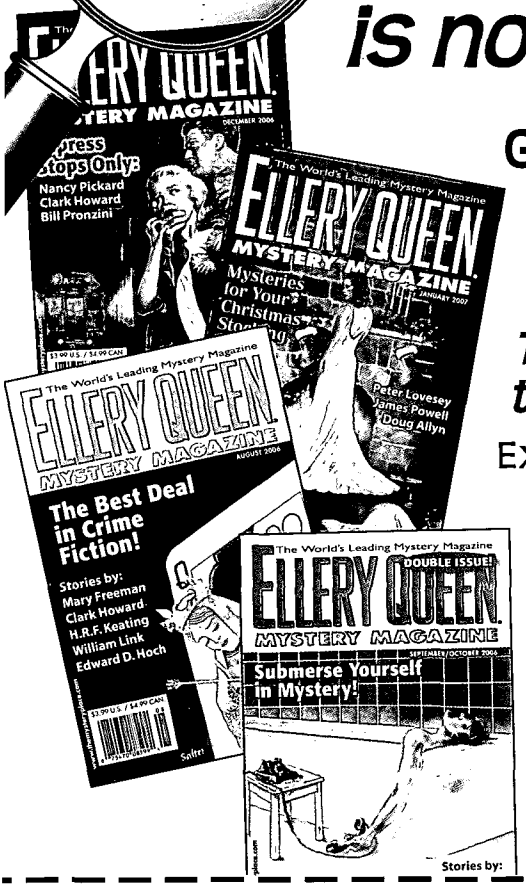

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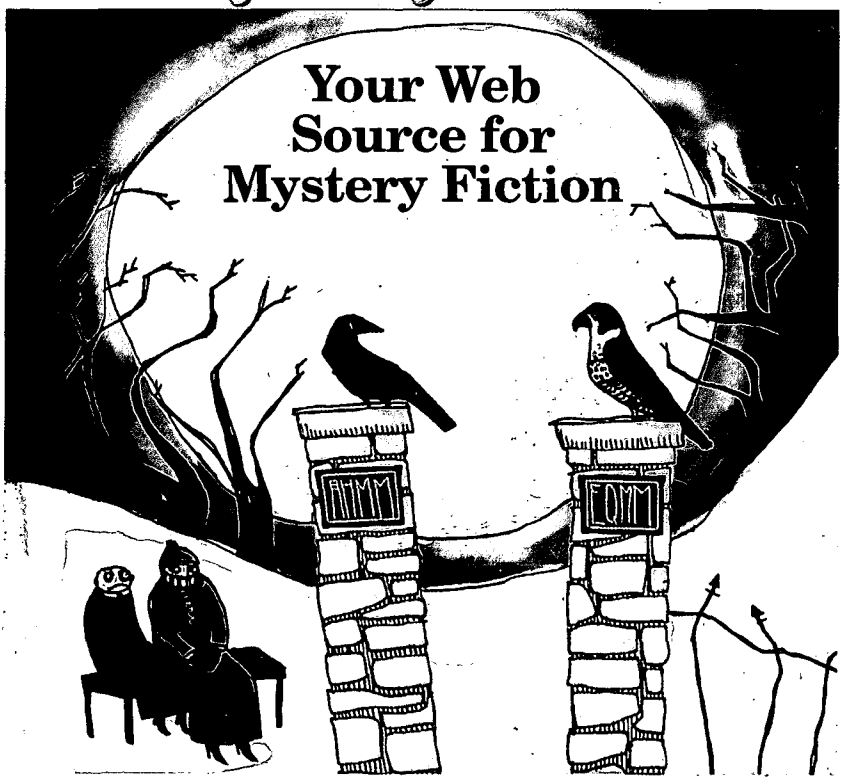

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